Introduction

The feminist and gay emancipation movements over the past 35 years have drawn attention to a range of issues in relation to sex and gender, including women’s freedom from unwanted pregnancy, sexual violence against women and gay men, freedom of sexual expression and self-determination, and the dangers of sexually transmitted disease such as HIV and AIDS. This has been accompanied by scholarly exploration of such issues particularly with respect to HIV/AIDS. Academic literature about sex and gender encompasses diverse disciplines each with its own perspective of sexuality and gender. However, few of these engage successfully with women’s sexuality and the way in which it is related to gender relations. Science, medicine, and mainstream psychology are generally uninterested in women’s sexuality as a product of dynamic social relations and practice. Recent developments in sociology and feminism, however, suggest a different approach that insists on the centrality of gendered power relations. Yet, the focus, to date, has been on the role that masculine dominance plays in shaping women’s sexuality. Such characterisation precludes the possibility that women are agential beings,
able to chart courses of sexual practice for themselves and to seek sexual pleasure in the process.

The inability of scholarly discourse to recognise or successfully theorise feminine sexual agency means that there are few intellectual or praxeological resources through which the project of women’s sexual emancipation can take place. While it is argued that such a political project is old-fashioned or indeed obsolete, it seems to me that there are significant grounds to challenge such an assertion. Sexual emancipation remains only an aspiration when women continue to experience sexual abuse, coercion and rape, are at risk for sexual disease and unwanted pregnancy, and face barriers in gaining sexual expression and pleasure. An exploration into, and an understanding of, the ways in which women are agential in their sexual practices with men contributes to understanding both the obstacles and possibilities associated with the project of sexual emancipation for women.

Three key questions structure the study:

1. What discourses do women use to make sense of their sexual experiences?
2. How are these discourses related to women’s sex practice?
3. What is the relationship between women’s sex practice and their sexual identity? And how is such identity brought into being?

These questions are informed by an overarching study objective: to explore the ways in which the social world intersects with the body in generating women’s sex practice and their sexual identities. Exploration of
these questions requires data that permit analysis of the relationship between the intimate details of women’s sexual lives and the complex social dynamics that shape them. To this end, the study employs life history interviews to ask women themselves about their experiences with sex. This approach not only reveals stories about life events and significant players but also, importantly, how women see themselves relating to these events and to the people involved. It provides the opportunity to identify and analyse how sexual experience is prefigured by previous experiences and constitutive of subsequent ones. The cumulative detail yielded by such an approach also permits examination of the way that sexuality intersects with other axes of social relations such as class, gender and race.

Organisation

Chapters One to Three of the thesis lay the epistemological basis for the research questions and methods used in the study. Chapter One reviews the literature associated with empirical inquiry into women’s sex practice with men. It elucidates a general pattern or structure of sex practice and begins to explore the means through which such a pattern is generated.

Chapter Two provides fuller understanding of the structure of women’s sex practice by exploring the ways in which it is linked to subjectivity. Here, a number of key theoretical frameworks are explored, including Cartesian medico-scientific discourse, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and feminism.
Chapter Three further explores the theoretical relationship between sex and subjectivity but does so through frameworks that make central the praxeology of social relations and, in particular, gender relations. It is argued that such a framework most successfully captures the way in which women can be sexual agents.

Chapter Four describes the research processes that generated the data and findings. The chapter provides a rationale for the choice of grounded theory and progressive-regressive method as the research strategy, the life history interview as the method of data collection and narrative analysis as the procedure used to interpret respondents' talk.

Chapter Five is the first of five chapters that present and discuss the research findings. It explores the study's first research question by identifying and critically examining the discourses through which respondents gave meaning to their sexual experiences.

Chapter Six explores the study's second research question by examining the relationship between the discourses presented in Chapter Five and the sex practices that women identified in their interviews.

Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine explore the study's third research question by examining how sex is related to identity and the processes through which feminine sexual identity is gained. Chapter Seven explores
the relationship between women’s sex practices, the discourses through which they made sense of them and the construction of their sexual identity. Chapter Eight explores how women’s sexual identity is shaped by the quality of their relationships with men. The final chapter, Chapter Nine, explores how the symbolic and material dimensions of class and race intersect with discourses of sexuality, shaping the kind of sex practices in which women engage and the kind of sexual identity gained.

Finally, a concluding discussion summarises the way that women engage in sex as embodied practice, in relation to powerful social discourses, and develop sexual subjectivity. It draws attention to evidence that suggests women are agential in their sexual experiences and identity, and it reflects on what such findings mean for the project of women’s sexual emancipation.
Chapter One

The facts of heterosex: What do women do sexually?

This chapter reviews the empirical research into women’s sexual relations with men in order to elucidate a general pattern or structure of sex practice and to begin to explore how such a pattern is produced. Empirical sex research emerges from three distinct academic disciplines: sexology, health science and feminism. The discussion of this chapter is structured by these three approaches.

The tradition of sexology

The original sexologists were natural scientists whose views of sex emerged from the positivist perspectives of nineteenth century medico-scientific discourse. They believed that sexual behaviours were determined by the “laws of Nature” and, accordingly, could be discovered, described and analysed (Weeks, 1985: 64). The foundational sexological works, Kraft-Ebbing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1903) and Havelock Ellis’s *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1936), reflect such a belief and are
essentially scientific exercises in classifying the variations in, or
pathologies of, sexual practice.

Alfred Kinsey adopted a sexological approach in *Sexual Behaviour in the
Human Female* (1953), which represents the first scholarly inquiry into
women’s sex practice. It reports the findings of case history research on
5940 white American women, quantifying how often women engage in sex
and what kind of sex they have. The main finding was that most women
experienced sex within committed relationships (Kinsey, 1953: 346).
Among unmarried women, most had engaged in “pre-marital petting” -
kissing or mutual masturbation – but only 35% had engaged in “pre-marital
coitus” (Kinsey, 1953: 288). For married women, sex consisted almost
entirely of vaginal intercourse with varying degrees of foreplay. One-third
had never experienced orgasm (Kinsey, 1953: 373) and half reported only
ever engaging in “missionary position” sex (Kinsey, 1953: 346). Indeed,
one third of older married women reported that they did not even remove
their clothing during sex. This highlights the degree to which women’s
sexual practices during the 1940s and 1950s occurred within a socially
sanctioned framework of marriage and passive feminine sexuality.
Importantly, however, Kinsey’s findings challenged the traditionally held
view that women were asexual and non-desiring (Garnets and Peplau,
2000: 186). Indeed, his results could be interpreted to mean that two thirds
of women enjoyed sex to the point of orgasm, at least some of the time.
The sexological style of inquiry was further developed in the work of Masters and Johnson (1966) and their endeavour to create a foundation of physiological knowledge about sex practice. Here, the description, categorisation and quantification of sexual behaviour were comprehensive. In a laboratory setting complete with “artificial coitation devices” capable of recording intravaginal observational and chemical data, 694 American men and women underwent examination of their physiological responses to sexual stimulation (Masters and Johnson, 1966: 21). An extraordinary amount of data was collected on such things as nipple distension, respiration, blood pressure and perspiration, among others. This data was used to conclude that a “normal” sexual response cycle for both men and women consisted of four phases: the excitement phase, plateau phase, orgasmic phase and resolution phase (Masters and Johnson, 1966: 4). In the view of Masters and Johnson, the sexual behaviours in which people engage are directly linked to these physiological features. For instance, women’s sexual desire was seen to emerge from the physiological pleasure of clitoral stimulation and their fear of sex was seen to emerge from an inability to achieve orgasm (Masters and Johnson, 1966: 313-314). Such a perspective privileges the physiological, providing little authority to the social world in shaping women’s sexual experiences.

Although sexological in orientation, Gagnon and Simon’s Sexual Conduct (1973) nevertheless represents the first social analysis of sexual behaviour. Gagnon and Simon reanalysed Kinsey’s data within a new
theoretical framework of “social scripts”. Here, patterns of sexual practices were thought to arise from socially prescribed norms of sexuality. Individuals acquire their sexual “character” through a process of acculturation in which they take up, internalise and enact culturally prescribed normative roles (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 1994: 6). For Gagnon and Simon (1973), scripts explain all aspects of the human sexual experience:

Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience (p. 19).

For Gagnon and Simon, scripts are responsible for both the “external”, interpersonal or shared aspects of sexual practice and the “internal”, psychological aspects. Thus, unlike their sexological predecessors, Gagnon and Simon separated sexual practice from the biology of the body and suggested that a person’s sexuality is powerfully shaped by the social world.

Such emphasis on the social world is evident in Gagnon and Simon’s reinterpretation of what Kinsey described as women’s “conservative” sexuality. For example, they interpreted Kinsey’s finding that women were uninterested in fellatio or “positional variety” to be a reflection of social “training” (Gagnon and Simon, 1973: 86-87). They saw women’s initiation of fellatio or an “on top” position as a rejection of the female sexual script that positions women as asexual and submissive.
While contemporary sexological research acknowledges the existence of the social world in shaping sexual behaviours, it remains committed to a model of sex that is biologically derived. For example, the *National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS)* (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 1994) of sexual practices in the United States uses what can be viewed as a bio-social framework to understand sexuality. Here, “socialisation into a particular culture” (Laumann et al., 1994: 3-4) is thought to influence sexual behaviour, but biologically endogenous factors hold primary authority in determining sex practice.

The *NHSLS* used a complex random sampling design to select and interview, face-to-face, 3432 American men and women about their sexual practice. Results of the survey indicated that, in the twelve months prior to study interviews, 75% of women had had only one sex partner, supporting Kinsey’s proposition that most women experience sex within monogamous, long-term relationships (Laumann et al, 1994: 177). Two thirds of women engaged in sex at least once per week (Laumann et al, 1994: 87), making it a regular part of their lives. Yet, despite the high frequency of sexual practice, only 29% of women experienced orgasm regularly during sex, compared with 75% of men (Laumann et al, 1994: 116). Moreover, only 38% of women reported feeling emotionally content with their sexual experiences (Laumann et al, 1994: 117).

Such findings obviously raise questions about why women participate in sex if they gain so little physical or emotional satisfaction. Unfortunately,
however, the focus of the NHSLS on the biological determinants of sex leaves little room to explore such questions.

The *Hite Report of Female Sexuality* (Hite, 1976) also followed the sexological approach of categorising and counting sex practices. Yet it incorporated qualitative dimensions by asking women themselves about their sexual experiences. Approximately 3000 American women, all of whom were contacted through women’s organisations and universities, responded to Hite’s survey (Hite, 1976: 23). This convenience sampling method meant that some of Hite’s findings were considerably different from those found in random samples like the NHSLS. For instance, while the NHSLS found that only one third of women masturbate, Hite (1976: 59) reported that 82% of respondents did and, of these, 95% reached orgasm easily. Such differences are probably attributable to the socio-economic differences between the two samples, with Hite’s sample including a greater number of educated, middle class women than the NHSLS.

Based on her survey findings, Hite (1976) concluded that “it is not female sexuality that has a problem [with sex] but society that has a problem in its own definition of sex and the subordinate role that definition gives women” (p. 60). In Hite’s view, women have an intrinsic capacity for sexual pleasure and any sexual problems they experience derive from the social inclination to define sex in male centred terms, that is, as penetration followed by ejaculation. For Hite (1976: 229), the primary source of female
sexual pleasure is not the vagina but the clitoris. It is for this reason that, although most women can achieve orgasm while masturbating, only 30% orgasm regularly during vaginal intercourse.

Hite’s emphasis on the clitoral nature of female pleasure highlights how she ultimately situates herself within a sexological framework. For Hite, the nature of women’s sexual practice is, in the end, derived from biological features of the body. At times, Hite falls back on the scientific findings of Masters and Johnson (1966) to provide understanding for the findings in her own study. For instance, she explains the high prevalence of masturbation among women as “pure biological feedback - one of the few forms of instinctive behaviour to which we have access” (Hite, 1976: 59). Hite’s research highlights the degree to which women can enjoy the sexual pleasures of their own bodies and, to a lesser degree, the pleasures of sex with another person. Yet, for Hite, these pleasures are all ultimately derived from evolutionary and physiological forces.

Robert Bell (1974) undertook a similar, feminist-inspired study in Australia. He aimed to explore “how women become the sexual beings they are and what this means in their relationships to other people” (Bell, 1974: 15). However, despite his interest in the social and relational aspects of sex, he used the ubiquitous, sexological, bio-social framework to give meaning to his findings, emphasising the importance of the “underlying biological possibilities” shaping sexual practice (Bell, 1974: 9). Data from open-ended questionnaires were collected from 1442 Australian women who
volunteered for the survey through television and radio promotions. The volunteers tended to be better educated, more career-oriented and less religious than the “average” Australian woman (Bell, 1974: 17) and, significantly, all participants were married.

Bell (1974: 119) reported that 62% of respondents said the sexual aspects of their marriage were good or very good. Respondents reported having sex on average ten times per month, with a third reporting that they would like to have sex more frequently (Bell, 1974: 119). Yet again, such a finding undermines the stereotype that women dislike sex and that it is the man who persistently seeks it. Women who reported feeling dissatisfied with sex disclosed that this was related to feelings of dislike towards their husband or feelings that their husband treated them insensitively and disrespectfully (Bell, 1974: 109). Although Bell did not elaborate on this, such data strongly suggest that a woman’s experience with sex is shaped by the quality of the relationship that she has with her partner. Bell (1974: 123) reported that 56% of respondents experienced orgasm all or most of the time, a finding that is significantly higher than that reported in other studies. Furthermore, 85% of Bell’s sample reported initiating sex at least some of the time and 41% said they needed five minutes or less of foreplay before feeling sexually aroused (Bell, 1974: 115). Clearly, such findings are not consistent with the stereotype that women are asexual, passive and uninterested in sexual pleasure.
The recently completed *Australian Study of Health and Relationships* (ASHR) is the first population-based, random-sample design survey of sexual practice to be conducted in Australia (Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich and Visser, 2003: 107). While there has been a substantial history of population surveys of sex practice in Australia, these have focussed on particular groups such as gay men or adolescents (Bacon, 1972; Collins and Harper, 1985; Kovacs, Dunn, Selwood, 1986; McCabe, 1987; Connell, Crawford, Kippax, Dowsett, Baxter, Watson, Berg, 1989; Connell, Dowsett, Rodden, Davis, Watson, Baxter, 1991; Connell and Kippax, 1990). The ASHR aimed to collect information about the sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of Australians between the ages of sixteen and 59 (Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich and Visser, 2003: 107). Telephone interviews were conducted with 19037 randomly selected men and women, most of who identified as heterosexual and were in regular, monogamous relationships (Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich and Visser, 2003: 109).

Preliminary findings demonstrate a similar pattern of sexual practice to that evident in the American NHSLS. For instance, the ASHR reports that 89.5% of Australian women engage in regular heterosexual sex and 91.5% had only one sexual partner in the previous twelve months (Rissel, Richters, Grulich, Visser, Smith, 2003: 126), corroborating the idea that most women experience sex within monogamous and committed relationships. Moreover, women generally reported overall satisfaction with their sexual experiences with 79.1% finding sex very satisfying and the same proportion feeling “emotionally satisfied” (ASHR, 2003: 2).
Approximately 70% of women reported having experienced orgasm at least once in their lifetime (Visser, Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich, 2003: 146) while one third said they masturbated. Interestingly, 14-16% of women reported using pornography, either on video or the internet, and sex toys as a part of their sexual practice (ASHR, 2003: 2), suggesting that some women are interested in sexual exploration. Nevertheless, the ASHR also indicates that women are more likely to report less interest in sex, less pleasure and more pain (Richters, Grulich, Visser, Smith, Rissel, 2003: 166).

In sum, sexology research plays a vital role in describing what women do sexually. It provides evidence for a general pattern of sex practice in which sex is a regular part of most women’s lives and is, for the most part, experienced within monogamous, marriage-style relationships. Moreover, for most women, sex generally takes the form of vaginal intercourse followed, for some, by orgasm. Importantly, by revealing the ways in which women seek and enjoy sexual pleasure, sexology research serves to refute traditional notions of women as asexual and undesiring. Nevertheless, the sexology literature also suggests that many women experience difficulty with sex, which, as Hite (1976) proposes, may be linked to social discourses that define sex in the male-centred terms of vaginal penetration followed by orgasm. While this sort of sexological knowledge is important in understanding feminine sexuality, sexology itself offers little towards understanding why women’s sex practices are patterned in this way. It does not provide understanding of the way that
most women confine their sex practice to monogamous, committed relationships, avoid pornography and sex toys, and have difficulty with orgasm. By remaining committed to a positivist, taxonomic style of inquiry, most sexologists fail to adequately address such issues. The following discussion examines research that departs significantly from sexological approaches, instead making the social world central in the “making” of sexuality.

**Sexual health and safety: Introducing the social world**

The emergence of HIV/AIDS has generated a significant body of research about sexual practice, in particular those practices concerned with disease transmission. While a sizeable part of this research adopts a positivist approach (for instance see Reader, Carter, Crawford, 1988; Turtle, Ford, Habgood, Grant, 1989; Crawford, Turtle, Kippax, 1990; Rodden, Crawford, Kippax, French, 1996; Johnson, Rozmus, Edmisson, 1999; Whitaker, Miller, Clark, 2000; Katz, Fortenberry, Tu, 2001), some employ qualitative methods and, in doing so, draw attention to the way in which the social world is central in shaping the choices and decisions women make in their sexual practice.

For example, the *Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP)* (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1991a; Holland et al., 1991b; Holland et al., 1990; Holland et al., 1992a; Holland et al., 1992b) used such an approach to explore the sexual experiences of British women aged sixteen to 21. It aimed to examine “what is taken for granted in
conventional notions of male and female sexuality, why women take sexual risks and how barriers to safer sexual behaviour can be identified and changed” (Holland et al., 1990: 339). One hundred and fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted, permitting women to talk about their experiences in their own words and allowing the meanings involved in their sex practices to emerge unencumbered by the a priori frameworks often used in positivist sexology.

The key finding of the study was that young women experienced a great deal of conflict in their attempts to practise safe sex. They were deeply concerned about their reputations and buying, carrying or asking for the use of condoms was thought of as unfeminine and embarrassing. The researchers concluded that “having a condom on one’s person indicates a lack of sexual innocence, an unfeminine identity, that of a woman actively seeking sex” (Holland et al., 1991: 143). Thus, women were reluctant to use condoms for fear of being thought of as promiscuous and immoral. Moreover, most young women perceived condoms to be useful only in casual sexual encounters when it was not clear what sort of sexual history a partner had or whether he could be trusted (Holland et al, 1991: 140). Accordingly, when women were in sexual relationships that they hoped would be committed and long-term, they were reluctant to use condoms because they signified a lack of trust in what was meant to be a monogamous, trusting relationship (Holland et al., 1990: 344). Young women thus experienced a myriad of conflicting understandings about their sexuality in relation to condom use.
The researchers interpreted such findings through a framework of “institutionalised heterosexuality”, which refers to entrenched social discourses that define sexual intercourse in terms of male dominance and female submission (Holland et al., 1990: 342). Here, young women’s investment in the discourses of heterosexual monogamy, romance and true love severely undermined their capacity to introduce condoms in their sex practice. Holland et al conclude that the expectation that women insist on condoms works against the social expectations placed on them to be good, moral and decent women and, moreover, works against their endeavours to develop trusting, loving and steady relationships with men.

The way in which social discourses of femininity shape sexual practice is also evident in the experiences of teenaged girls (Lear, 1995; Lear, 1997; Hyde and Jaffee, 2000; Tolman, 2000; Joffe, 1997) and older women (Maxwell and Boyle, 1995; Willig, 1995). For example, Lear (1995), examined how teenaged girls (and boys) negotiate condom use during sex, discovering that, in fact, very little verbal negotiation around sex took place. She reported that, compared to boys, girls were more likely to be concerned about reputation and these concerns influenced their ability to practise safe sex (Lear, 1995: 1320). Maxwell and Boyle (1995) found similar concerns about reputation in their research with women aged 30 years and older. Hopes for long-term meaningful relationships played a significant role in women’s sexual choices and decisions. Women often
ignored the risks of unprotected sex in order to invest their relationships with meanings of trust and commitment (Maxwell and Boyle, 1995: 288).

A significant amount of this kind of safe sex research has been conducted in Australia (Kippax, Crawford, Waldby, Benton, 1990; Roberts, 1993; Roberts, Kippax, Crawford, 1993; Waldby, Kippax and Crawford, 1993; Crawford, Kippax, Waldby 1994; Roberts, Kippax, Spongberg, Crawford, 1996; Lawless, Kippax, Crawford, 1996; Stephenson, Kippax, Crawford, 2000). One of the most evocative findings from this work is that women’s capacity to practise safe sex varies from partner to partner, through developing stages of a relationship, and through varying degrees of sexual experience. For example, Kippax et al (1990: 541) suggest that women with more sexual experience and more sex partners tend to have better skills in negotiating safe sex than women who have limited sex experience within committed relationships. Such findings are suggestive of how the meanings women associate with sex may change through their life experiences and contribute to the development of their sexual agency.

Thompson’s (1990) study of teenaged girls’ stories of sexual initiation also provides evidence for the way that women’s sexual experiences are transformed through previous experience. She describes how girls who had “foreknowledge” of their sexuality – for example, through masturbation, childhood sex play, and heavy petting - were far more likely to take pleasure in first intercourse, and to make plans for safe practice (Thompson, 1990: 357). On the other hand, girls who were sexually
unprepared – that is, had never masturbated or touched their clitorises or vaginas, had not experienced petting, foreplay or desire – were more likely to have negative experiences of first intercourse (Thompson, 1990: 357). These girls described feeling like they had little sexual choice; they experienced little pleasure and were glad to have the whole experience over with. Indeed, these girls had virtually no active role in their sexual initiation and, therefore, were incapable of negotiating safe sex.

“Safe-sex” research as a whole takes a significantly different approach to understanding women’s sex practice than sexology. Most notably, it proposes that women’s sex practice is not a predestined product of biological attributes, instead locating it firmly within the realm of gender relations. It reveals how discourses of femininity and “institutionalised heterosexuality” play a powerful role in shaping the choices and decisions women make in their sex practice. In doing this, it provides some understanding about the broad structure of practice elucidated by sexological research that reports that women tend to have sex within monogamous, marriage-style relationships. From the “safe-sex” research perspective, such a pattern emerges because there are powerful discourses that construct women who have sex outside of committed relationships as “easy, fair game, a slag” (Holland et al., 1991: 143). Nevertheless, such research basically leaves unaddressed the question of why such discourses are so powerful in shaping women’s sexual practice with men.
Chapter One: The facts of heterosex

Feminist sex research: linking sex and identity

The third major body of research exploring women’s sexual practices takes a dramatically different approach to that of sexology and “safe-sex” research by examining the role that sex plays in the production of gender relations and identities. For example, Wendy Hollway (1984, 1989) explores men’s and women’s narratives on relationships, sexuality and gender. She identifies three discourses through which men and women give meaning to their sexual experiences (Hollway, 1984). The *male sex drive discourse* constructs men’s sexuality as “directly produced by a biological drive, the function of which is to ensure reproduction of the species” (Hollway, 1984: 231). According to this discourse, women’s sexuality is non-existent. It is produced as the passive and complementary “other” of active and unruly masculine sexuality. Second is the *have/hold discourse* which is concerned with “the Christian ideals associated with monogamy, partnership and family life” (Hollway, 1984: 232). Here, women’s sexuality is understood as either reproductively focussed and confined to a monogamous marital relationship and thereby moral; or rabid, dangerous and in need of control. Hollway’s (1984: 234) third discourse is that of *permissive sexuality*, which views sexuality as natural and, therefore, something that should not be repressed. From this perspective, women are afforded the same sexuality as men, one that is active and uncontrollable.

Significantly, Hollway (1984) suggests that these discourses shape the kinds of gendered *identities* people assume: “women and men are placed
in relation to each other through the meanings which a particular discourse makes available: [for instance] the female who yields and submits to the man” (p. 236). She proposes that women’s sex practice is a part of their desire to gain a particular identity within a social world that is structured by gender relations. Women “invest” themselves in the available discourses to gain a sense of femininity.

Jane Ussher (1994, 1997a) also makes links between sex and gendered identities in her interview-based research with men and women. In one study (Ussher, 1994), she reports how both men and women made reference to what she calls the Madonna/whore discourse in which feminine sexuality was seen as either passively asexual and reproductively-driven, or “mad, bad or dangerous” (p. 165). Ussher describes how such discourse produced conflict for women who repudiated a view of themselves as sexual victims and acknowledged their sexual desire but also saw themselves as “good” and sexually proper. For them, there was no available discourse in which to acknowledge what they saw as their active sexuality while sustaining a respectable feminine identity.

Ussher (1997a) makes further links between sex and gendered identity in Fantasies and Femininity where she uses empirical data to explore the social representations of feminine sexuality and the material effects of these on women’s lives. A part of this involved exploring how women negotiate their feminine identity through sex, resisting and reconciling
discursive images such as the Madonna/whore in order to achieve a sense of feminine identity. Importantly, she emphasises that the achievement of feminine identity is a pluralistic and fluid process involving engagement with what she calls “personality typologies” where women slide and shift between “being girl”, “doing girl”, “resisting girl” and “subverting girl” (Ussher, 1997a: 445-460).

“Being girl” is the “the archetypal position of woman” and takes place when women want to be rather than do femininity (Ussher, 1997a: 445). Here, women believe in, and live out, the dream of “romantic heroine” for whom “Mr. Right” appears and happiness ensues. In assuming such a position, women strive to transform their bodies into objects of beauty for the purpose of attracting a man. Ussher (1997a) describes how women’s engagement with “being girl” effectively means “the annihilation of the self, of autonomy, of active desire” (p. 448). If the romantic dream does not materialise, their sense of self worth deteriorates. Interestingly, Ussher (1997a: 446) notes that the position of “being girl” is one that women tend to relinquish as they grow older, gain experience and come to believe that heterosexual romance is a myth.

Women assume a “doing girl” typology when they are performing the demands of archetypal femininity but know “the fragility of the façade of femininity and the fact that doing girl is about playing a part” (Ussher, 1997a: 450). “Doing girl” means that women engage in sex practice that
positions them as feminine but do so for their own pleasure and empowerment:

A woman who is doing girl will ‘have sex’ if she wants to, if she enjoys it, or even because she is ‘in love’ – but if sex (or the man) does not live up to expectations (and standards these days are high) the woman who is doing girl doesn’t stay. (Ussher, 1997a: 450-451)

Women who engage with “doing girl” know that the heterosexual, romantic dream is a myth but they nevertheless desire a loving, romantic relationship. They have a compartmentalised identity, tending to take up different positions in different life contexts: for instance, they condemn heterosexual romance yet persist in desiring and seeking it.

On the other hand, when women assume a “resist girl” typology, they ignore or deny the behaviours associated with traditional femininity (Ussher, 1997a: 455). They are not interested in indulging the egos of men but instead expect to be treated the same as men. Here, women are capable of showing open sexual desire for men without shame. They can enjoy sexual pleasure and freedom and, unlike with “being girl”, women who “resist girl” do not gain a sense of identity exclusively through their appearance, shape of body or ability to attract a man (Ussher, 1997a: 455).

Lastly, the “subvert girl” typology allows women to “knowingly play with gender as a performance, twisting, imitating and parodying traditional scripts of femininity” (Ussher, 1997a: 458). Here, women assume a sexual
identity that challenges the archetypal “being girl”. They enjoy exercising sexual power, taking up the traditional male role of sexual predator.

Ussher’s framework of “personality typologies” is insightful because it provides understanding about how women’s sex practices are implicated in the formation of sexual and gendered identity. Unlike the sexological or “safe-sex” approaches, it demonstrates the way in which sex practice is intrinsically linked to socially produced symbolic representations and gendered identities.

Such a link between sex practice and identity is also evident in the work of Roberts, Kippax, Waldby, and Crawford (1995), who explored this relationship with respect to women’s experiences with “faking it”. The researchers revealed that women fake orgasm because they want to verify the sexual proficiency of their male partner. Affirming their partners’ sexual skill was seen to concomitantly secure their partners’ masculine identity. Importantly, in affirming masculine identity, “faking it” also secured women’s feminine identity as sexually passive (Roberts et al, 1995: 530). Here, women constituted and secured their feminine identity through sex practice, by making their partner feel sexually skilful. This enabled the male partner to sustain his dominant, masculine sexual identity and the woman to embrace a passive, feminine sexual identity.

Taylor and Ussher’s (2001) research with men and women who practise sado-masochism (SM) demonstrates a similar relationship between sex
practice and gendered identity. Participants in this study were asked to discuss how they defined SM and how they made sense of their own desire for, and enjoyment of, SM (Taylor and Ussher, 2001: 296). One of the more interesting themes to emerge was how some women understood their desire for SM as an act of dissidence. It was seen as a means through which they could exercise power over men, and “fuck with” the hegemony of gender and heterosexuality (Taylor and Ussher, 2001: 303). Such a finding suggests that while some sexual practices seem to uphold a feminine identity, as Roberts et al (1995) have demonstrated with the act of “faking” orgasm, other sexual practices serve to distance women from traditional feminine identity. Either way, it is evident that sex practice is not straightforwardly determined by biological drives or social discourse. Rather, it appears to play a role in how women participate in an embodied way in the constitution of their gendered identity.

The process of producing such gendered, sexual identity is innovatively explored by Frigga Haug (1987), who examined how “sexualisation” emerges from the day-to-day “living” in bodies (Haug, 1987: 77). She argued that “sexualisation” occurs not just through sexual experiences but, rather, through broader life experiences and bodily developments that are not directly associated with sex organs. Haug worked with a group of women colleagues to collect, record and analyse the memories of their entry into “womanhood”, focussing on how bodily changes shaped their sense of feminine identity. For example, one member of the team recalled how having her school girl plaits cut off carried significant meanings of the
passage from childhood to adulthood (Haug, 1987: 91-114). She described the ambivalent feelings involved in wanting to be seen as “grown-up” and the fears that such changes would bring to her life. Other team members recalled the anxious relationships they had with their developing bodies and how a “fully developed” body brought with it social expectations about acting and, indeed, “being” an adult (Haug, 1987: 139).

Haug (1987: 157) claimed that the adoption of adulthood for women is synonymous with the adoption of sexuality and the way it is socially organised. Thus, women’s everyday actions and their relationship with their bodies produce the “feminine” and its concomitant meanings about sexuality. For Haug, then, women’s sexual practice does not simply include the act of intercourse or the experience of orgasm, as sexology suggests. Instead, it includes virtually all practice: each time women undertake an action that locates them as feminine, they are simultaneously locating themselves as sexual.

Haug’s research alludes the active role that individual women play in the formation of their own sexual identity. It rejects the notion that people are simply “bundles of reactions to all-powerful structures, or to the social relations within which we have [been] formed” (Haug, 1987: 35). Thus, in contrast to “safe-sex” research in which sex practice is viewed as an artefact of social discourse, Haug (1987) suggests that women “participate actively in the formation of [their] own past experience” (p. 35). Thus, while the act of cutting off plaits occurs in the social domain and has socially-
entrenched meanings about becoming an adult, in Haug’s view, each individual girl plays a particular, active and self-reflexive role in the process.

In sum, feminist sex research demonstrates an important and fundamental link between sexual practice and identity. Evident in such research is the way that practices such as sexual monogamy, faking orgasm, wearing hair a certain way, or even SM engenders women with a sense of feminine identity. Sex practice shapes how women see themselves relating to others and to the world around them. Such findings raise doubts about the sexological claim that sex practice is biologically derived. It also serves to question the significant body of socially-oriented health research that views sex practice as a straightforward product of hegemonic discourses of femininity and “institutionalised heterosexuality”. Rather, feminist sex research suggests that sex is a complex practice that is actively adopted and pursued by individuals in ways that produce unique, yet gendered, sexual identities.

**Conclusion**

This review provides evidence for the existence of a general structure of sexual practice among women. Sexological research reveals that this is characterised by penetrative, vaginal intercourse within monogamous, marriage-style relationships. However, sexology offers little towards an understanding of why such a pattern exists. On the other hand, the findings of “safe-sex” and feminist research suggests that women’s sex
practice is shaped by powerful discourses of “institutionalised
heterosexuality” but in ways that involve the self-reflexivity of individual
women and, as Hollway (1984) proposes, their “investment” in particular
kinds of sexual identity. In short, this review suggests that women’s sex
practices emerge from the highly complex relations between the physical
features of the body, the social world and a woman’s own sense of self
and relation to others. The following chapter takes this relationship as its
starting point to explore more fully how sex is related to identity and the
social world and, as importantly, what possibilities exist for an agential
feminine sexuality.
Chapter Two

Sex and subjectivity: frameworks for understanding feminine sexuality

This chapter explores the relation between sex practice and subjectivity elucidated in Chapter One by examining a number of key theoretical frameworks. It does so with a view towards understanding how feminine sexuality is related to the social world and the gender relations that constitute it. Moreover, it explores how feminine sexuality can be active, desiring, and agential. The chapter begins with the medico-scientific framework proposed by sexology which views sexuality and subjectivity as products of the natural world. The chapter then examines psychoanalytic frameworks which view sexuality as a product of individual, internal drives and their relationship to early childhood and familial experiences. This is followed by an analysis of poststructural accounts that reject the idea of psychological drives, instead linking sexuality with powerful cultural discourses. The chapter then turns to significant feminist theories of sexuality and subjectivity, beginning with the contributions of radical feminism where sexuality is viewed as the primary source of men's domination over women. This somewhat pessimistic view of sex is
critically challenged in the final section of the chapter in the work of feminists who use poststructural and psychoanalytic concepts to acknowledge and celebrate active feminine sexual desire and pleasure.

The medico-scientific framework: Descartes and biological determinism

The medico-scientific framework of sexuality is the epistemological framework underpinning the sexology research reviewed in the previous chapter. It advances the view that sexual behaviours result from an underlying biological imperative. The earliest medico-scientific discourses of sexuality represented women as either dangerously sexual or passively asexual (Sheridan, 1998; Matthews, 1984). The dualistic thinking of medico-scientific discourse meant that masculine sexuality was used as the measure against which feminine sexuality was understood. Men were thought to have a natural desire for sex and women, in being the natural “other” to this, became desiring only in response to uncontrollable masculine sexuality. As Sheridan (1998) suggests, in such a framework, women displaying active sexual desire were thought to be “mad women or bad women (i.e. prostitutes and women of the working class or of non-white races)” (p. 289).

By the end of the nineteenth century, such associations between sex and morality were disappearing in medico-scientific thinking. Darwinist ideas of evolutionary biology were used to construct human sexual behaviour in parallel to animal behaviour, characterising it in terms of the male instinct
for sexual conquest and the female instinct for reproduction (Sheridan, 1998: 289). Here, sex was no longer associated with morally-laden notions of good and bad. Instead, a more liberal view of sex as natural and, thereby, necessarily good and respectable emerged. The research work of Kinsey (1949, 1953), Masters and Johnson (1966) and Hite (1976) is founded upon the assumptions of such a framework and, through it, they repudiate the idea that women’s sexuality is irrational, virtuous or dangerous.

This view of sexuality is firmly rooted in a long history of medical, scientific and psychiatric discourses and, consequently, it has been powerful in regulating and shaping the sexual behaviour of the population (Foucault, 1976; Foucault 1984; Ehrenreich and English, 1978; Weeks, 1981, 1985; Ussher, 1993; Smart, 1995). Weeks (1985) comments on how the medico-scientific view of sex, as represented by sexology, has been successful in establishing the view that sexual identity is innate:

It is in their claim to specialised knowledge of the sexual origins of behaviour that the real power of sexology has lain. And stemming from this their achievement has been to naturalise sexual patterns and identities and thus obscure their historical genealogy. The results have been profound in shaping our concepts of sex and sexual subjectivities (p. 80).

By placing sex practice within a biological or medical framework, medico-scientific discourse obfuscates the social and historical genesis of sexual experiences. In doing so, it advances the view that sex practice and sexual identity is a straightforward product of a presocial, unique interior essence. That is, it constructs a model of the self that is “unitary”
(Weeks, 1981: 2; Ussher, 1994: 154), where a person's subjectivity and sexual behaviour is seen to emerge directly from the interiority of the individual.

The unitary model of subjectivity derives directly from the epistemological roots of medico-scientific discourse: the Cartesian claim to a mind-body divide. Here, the mind is viewed to be rational and therefore superior to the body, which itself is viewed as an object or instrument of the rational mind (Grosz, 1994: 6). As such, it is in the rationality of the mind that a person's unique essence or subjectivity is located. Each individual is seen to be born with an independent and individual essence that is articulated through the exercise of rational free will (Mansfield, 2000, 15). It is from this unitary individuality that a person's sexual identity is seen to emerge.

Such a construction has been criticised for failing to account for some key experiences of sex, such as desire and pleasure (Connell and Dowsett, 1992: 54-55). The sensual and erotic experiences of sex are lost in a discourse that defines sexuality in terms of bodily secretions, hormonal drives and rational free will. These arguments highlight the key weakness in the Cartesian model of sexuality: the absence of the social world. This means that there is no way to understand how sex is constituted through, and constrained by, social power relations. Moreover, in constructing sex and sexual identity as a product of a pre-social essence, the Cartesian model erases any possibility for an agential feminine sexuality. The unitary sexual self is biologically destined to express its pre-given sexuality.
Accordingly, men are destined to be active sexual beings born with an uncontrollable urge to seduce and copulate, and women are destined to be passive and reproductively oriented.

**The split self of psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Irigaray**

Psychoanalytic frameworks also offer a perspective of sexuality that is formed from the “inside out”. However, in contrast to medico-scientific frameworks, psychoanalytic approaches acknowledge and incorporate social dimensions in the construction of sexuality and subjectivity. Psychoanalysis conceives of sexuality as a force or drive that is constructed within individuals through the conflicting interplay of psychic desires associated with entry into the social world (Weeks, 1985: 128). Here, sexuality is viewed as a product of a struggling and contradictory internally-located subjectivity.

The following exploration of psychoanalysis is restricted to the work of Freud, Lacan and Irigaray. These theorists are included in order to provide introduction to the concepts of psychoanalysis. Freud offers understanding of the way that psychoanalysis links the behaviours of the individual to the social world. Lacan and Irigaray advance Freud’s theory by problematising his privileging of the masculine and, in this way, offering insight into the making of gender relations. It is recognised that there is a vast body of psychoanalytic writing, in particular by feminists, which provides significant insight into sexuality, subjectivity and lived experience. This work is not
described here because its psychological emphasis does not fully explore
the social relations of sexuality and the way that sexual subjectivity is
formed through material practices, which is the focus of this thesis.

Freud and the Oedipus Complex

Freud’s work centres on two concepts: the unconscious and repression
(Weeks, 1985: 129; Connell, 1987: 208). According to Freud, the
unconscious mind is constituted from internal desires, which the individual
represses when confronted with the demands of the social world. The
unconscious mind is a domain separate from the rational conscious mind.
It acts on its own unfamiliar and irrational logic, releasing images into the
conscious mind, creating contradictory and diverse feelings and
behaviours (Mansfield, 2000: 27).

Central to Freud’s understanding of sexuality and subjectivity is his
concept of the *Oedipus complex*. This refers to an apparently universal
phenomenon in which children are thought to have a pre-given, erotic
attachment to their mother. Such an attachment is believed to create
tensions that the individual child is forced to resolve in achieving
subjectivity. Freud suggests that when a boy infant gains awareness of
female genitalia and her “absence” of a penis, he sees the girl as
castrated. He fears becoming like her and losing his penis (Weeks, 1985:
140). The boy recognises that his mother lacks a penis and renounces his
erotic attachment to her. The boy mourns the loss of his mother but his
extreme anxiety of castration - which he fantasises would occur if he
maintained his attachment to the mother - forces him into a passive attachment with the father (Segal, 1994: 123). He balances his feelings of loss with the feelings of authority and power that come with his identification with the father (Segal, 1994: 125). In the end, by associating himself with the father, the boy infant claims a masculine identity and transfers his erotic desire for the mother to other women (Segal, 1994: 125).

For girls, the resolution of the Oedipus complex is different. Freud suggests that the discovery of male genitalia signifies to the girl that her genitals are inferior or “lacking” (Weeks, 1985: 140). She develops envy for the penis and concomitantly blames her mother, whom she sees as responsible for the disadvantage of not having a penis (Segal, 1994: 125). In the girl’s desire to possess the penis, she renounces her erotic attachment to the mother and turns to the father “in the hope of gaining the penis or its symbolic substitute, a baby” (Segal, 1994: 125). Freud proposes that the process of gaining a gendered identity for the girl is more difficult than it is for the boy. The girl has to alter the image of her object of desire and transfer her erotic desire for the mother to the father and other men. Moreover, she has to exchange her active clitoral sexuality for a passive vaginal sexuality in order to fulfil her desire for a baby (Segal, 1994: 125; Weeks, 1985: 140).

A significant feature of Freud’s theory is that the process of achieving a gendered identity is not linked to biology. Instead, for Freud, male and
female identities are generated through familial and social relations (Mansfield, 2000: 31) and, in this way, sexuality is interiorly produced but not biologically determined. Thus, identity formation is certainly an internal process but it is linked to a social world conceived in terms of binary gender relations and the naturalisation of heterosex (Weeks, 1985: 155).

The split self

As his ideas of the Oedipus complex suggest, Freud’s understanding of the self is one of internal division. In other words, unlike the unitary Cartesian self in which individual actions are seen to derive from a whole, rational, conscious mind, in Freud’s view, the rational mind is not in total control. Rather, it co-exists with the unconscious mind in a relationship that is characterised by struggle and discordance. The desires of the unconscious are constantly being repressed by the rational mind in the face of life’s demands (Weeks, 1985: 129). Thus, while the self acquires identity at the “Oedipal moment”, this identity attainment is “an ever precarious achievement, for it is constantly undermined by the repressed wishes which constitute the unconscious” (Weeks, 1985: 131). For Freud, then, sex practice is inextricably linked to a split, insecure, irrational and gendered subjectivity.

The idea of the split self constitutes what Mansfield (2000) refers to as the “subjective theory of the subject” (p. 9). Here, the psychoanalytic self has an individual substance distinct from the workings of the social world. It has a “knowable content and an analysable structure. In other words, the
subject is full to the brim of identifications, emotions and values, separating it from the values around it" (Mansfield, 2000: 36). Freud’s interior content is, however, quite different from the interior content of the Cartesian self. Freud does not see subjectivity as predetermined. Instead, it emerges through interaction with family members and the social world. In this way, people are not born as constituted individuals but gain a sense of individuality, albeit conflicting and ambivalent, through immersion in the social domain (Weeks, 1985: 130).

Nevertheless, Freud’s model of the self has been criticised for its tendency towards biological determinism (Weeks, 1985; Segal, 1994; Connell, 1987; Mansfield, 2000). By making the penis, or lack thereof, the pivotal factor in the formation of subjectivity, Freud reduces complex sexual and social relations to the presence or absence of a genital organ – that of men. Freud privileges the penis because, he argues, it is the “organ of generation” or “the key to the imperative of reproduction which ultimately governs sexuality” (Weeks, 1985: 141). Freud thus understands subjectivity and the social patterns of sexual difference as deriving from the biological, reproductive power of the penis. Correspondingly, the feminine sexual self is seen to originate from her lack of a penis. Thus, as Mansfield (2000: 34) concludes, despite the fact that subjectivity is not seen to be innate, the biological differences between male and female bodies are paramount. The feminine self is wholly defined through her difference to, and lack of, male genital organs. Her “lacking” is intrinsically
linked to a passive subjectivity centred upon “the unknown and ‘receptive’ organ – the vagina” (Segal, 1994: 153).

**Lacan, the Symbolic Order and the Phallus**

The psychoanalytic framework of Jacques Lacan undermines the assumption of penile supremacy that is ubiquitous in Freud’s work (Segal, 1994: 130). While Freud proposes that subjectivity emerges from the *Oedipal moment* – the identification with the mother or father – Lacan proposes that subjectivity emerges from entry into the “symbolic order” or the “system of signification which positions the subject within a given structure of meaning” (Weeks, 1985: 143). For Lacan, it is the symbolic order of language that structures the unconscious mind and brings the human self into the world (Weeks, 1985: 130; Mansfield, 2000: 39).

Lacan’s symbolic order is centralised around a key signifier – the phallus or the symbolic representative of the penis. Thus, unlike Freud, Lacan did not see the penis itself as the central organiser of sexual difference (Segal, 1994: 130). Instead, he considered the phallus a symbolic mark that “constitutes women in terms of lack and men in terms of the threat of lack” (Segal, 1994: 131-132). Lacan suggests that the male infant gains a masculine identity when he positions himself within the realm of language as a bearer of the phallus. Likewise, the girl infant gains feminine identity by positioning herself in language as lacking the phallus. For Lacan, the moment of subjectification is not when the self resolves its fears about possessing or lacking a penis. Rather, subjectivity is acquired when the
infant takes a position within the system of meanings and identities and thereby resolves its fears about possessing or lacking the phallus (Mansfield, 2000: 48).

In using the phallus and not the penis as the source of sexual difference, the making of gendered subjectivity is a more insecure process in Lacan’s framework than in Freud’s. While in both frameworks the female self is positioned as lacking, Lacan also constructs the male self with a “sense of lack” (Segal, 1994: 133). By making the phallus the signifier of power, the male is positioned with power but is continually threatened with losing it since he is “never able to match up to the power of the phallus” (Segal, 1994: 133-134). Thus, while Freud associates the subjectification of girls with “lack”, Lacan describes both masculine and feminine subjectivity in these terms.

Nevertheless, Lacan’s view of identity formation shares many features with that of Freud’s. Foremost, both Freud and Lacan propose that subjectivity emerges from the “interiority” of the individual. They view sex practice as inextricably linked to a split, insecure and individually-located subjectivity. Moreover, in both frameworks, feminine identity is constituted in relation to masculine identity which means that women are constructed as lacking or, as Segal (1994) comments, relegated to exist “in the shadow of the phallus” (p. 132). The hegemony of feminine lack in such psychoanalytic theories provides little possibility for an agential, reflective and pleasure-seeking feminine sexuality.
Irigaray: the plurality of feminine identity

The feminist psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray (1980), has challenged the psychoanalytic assertion that the feminine self is constituted by lack. She proposes instead that feminine subjectivity emerges from a process linked directly to the features of the female body:

Women’s autoeroticism is very different from a man’s. He needs an instrument in order to touch himself: his hand, woman’s genitals, language – And this self-stimulation requires a minimum of activity. But a woman touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation, and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible. A woman touches herself constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus within herself she is already two – but not divisible into ones – who stimulate each other. (Irigaray, 1980: 100)

Here, Irigaray contends that feminine sexuality derives from the specific physiological structures of the female body: the breasts, vulva, cervix, vaginal walls and so forth. The diffuseness of female bodily pleasure - that is, the bodily sensations that derive from these physiological structures – means that, for Irigaray, feminine subjectivity emerges from multiple beginnings. Thus, unlike the singular origin of masculine subjectivity – the penis – Irigaray’s feminine self is dynamic, fluid or “plural” (Irigaray, 1980: 102; Pringle, 1992: 95).

Importantly, Irigaray’s version of the formation of the feminine self does not “insist on a strict dividing line between the self, and what is outside it (the other)” (Mansfield, 2000: 72). That is, the feminine self is not defined as “other” in relation to the masculine self, but rather “enjoys a closeness with the other that is so near she cannot possess it, anymore than she can
possess herself” (Irigaray, 1980: 105). Here, Irigaray departs from traditional psychoanalysis, suggesting that women and men have different subjectivities derived not in relation to each other but from separate processes. In this way, Irigaray proposes that “we are women from the start” (Segal, 1994: 154).

Irigaray’s separate, dynamic, “plural” feminine self generates a feminine sexuality that is pleasure-seeking and active. Her view that feminine subjectivity derives from a different source than masculine subjectivity means, importantly, that women’s sexuality is not inferior to men’s. Rather, it is simply different. In this way, Irigaray poses a challenge to prevailing ways of thinking about feminine sexuality as inherently passive.

Nevertheless, Irigaray clearly remains within the psychoanalytic tradition in her view that subjectivity has a knowable and analysable “interior” content (Mansfield, 2000: 72-73). As such, Irigaray’s ideas have been criticised for suffering from the same physiological reductionism evident in Freud’s work. Segal (1994), for example, points out that by situating feminine subjectivity as emerging directly from bodily structure, and in effect disregarding the social world, “Irigaray closes down what we most need to open up if we are ever to tackle the psychic complexities and conflicts of women’s differing experiences as subjects and objects of sexual desire” (p. 155).
Compared to the medico-scientific frameworks, psychoanalysis provides an attractive means for understanding sex and subjectivity. It constructs a self that has interior substance, but does not exist entirely outside of the social world. It links the internal and external forces involved in subjectivity formation while distancing itself from Cartesian-style biological determinism. The divided self means that sex is an experience characterised by irrepressible desire, conflict and struggle and, in this way, the psychoanalytic framework proposes that sexual identity is an insecure achievement. Such “potentially subversive individualism” (Segal, 1999: 61) is perhaps the greatest strength of the psychoanalytic framework, especially when considering the possibility for an active, desiring and agential feminine sexuality. But, by linking the subjectivity formation process directly to the physical features of the body, psychoanalysis fails to successfully escape biological reductionism. It precludes agency. Consequently, possibilities for feminine desire, pleasure and freedom are foreclosed.

While the psychoanalytic frameworks construct a model of the self as one with interior substance, one that is basically produced from the “inside out”, the following discussion introduces a model of subjectivity that wholly challenges such an assertion. The work of Michel Foucault offers an understanding of sex and subjectivity that privileges the social world, one in which the self is constructed by the social exterior. Here, sex practice is viewed as a product of powerful social discourses acting upon, and constructing, a self that is multiple, fractured and incommensurable.
The multiple subject of poststructuralism: Michel Foucault

One of the key concepts developed by Foucault in understanding sexuality and subjectivity is that of discourse or bodies of knowledge that work to shape the behaviour of individuals (Foucault 1973, 1973, 1976, 1977). Crucial to Foucault’s framework is the way that discourses are characterised by, and routinely produce, power (Pringle, 1992: 86). They scrutinise and regulate the actions of individuals to produce “normative” behaviours among the population. In other words, as Peterson (1994) explains, “discourses have been part and parcel of the development of an extensive system of moral regulation of populations which have involved making human beings objects of the exercise of power” (p. 33).

Foucault did not conceive of discourse as a simple, singular phenomenon. Rather, he suggested that, at any given moment, there are multiple discourses in operation. Foucault (1976) termed this system the “tactical polyvalence of discourses” and emphasised that

We must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies (p. 100).

Here, Foucault departs from conceptualising power in terms of domination-submission. Instead, discursive power works in dynamic,
unstable and covert ways to produce individual practice that is normative but, at times, conflicted and fractured.

Foucault uses the concept of *polyvalent discursive control* to understand sexual practice and subjectivity (Foucault, 1976, 1984). He was interested in the way that sex is popularly seen to derive from an internal, essential identity and identified how such a view derives from the powerful discourses of medicine, science and psychiatry. Foucault claims, however, that sexuality is *not* a reflection of an internal true self. Rather, it is the discourses of science and medicine that construct it as such. In doing so, the medico-scientific and psychoanalytic discourses of sexuality are engendered with the capacity to regulate the sexual practice of populations. Because discourses establish sexuality as the key to our identity, “we engage actively with the ‘norms’ thus created, in order to find our true selves” (Pringle, 1992: 86).

Part of the significance of Foucault’s work lies in his ability not only to situate sexuality firmly within the social world, but also to offer an analysis of the genesis of the social power relations that construct discourses of sexuality (Connell and Dowsett, 1992: 61). A good example of this is Foucault’s mapping of the emergence of homosexuality as an identity. Prior to the nineteenth century, acts of homosexuality were understood in terms of practice and not “types”. That is, the term “homosexual” referred to the practice of sodomy and not to an individual characteristic or identity. However, the nineteenth century discourses of psychiatry and medicine
recast the term “homosexual”, disassociating it with practice and reformulating it with ontological meaning:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1976: 43).

Foucault (1976) also mapped the emergence of other “kinds” of discursively constructed sexual identities – the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult (p. 104-105) – which are, for Foucault, discursive strategies that work to scrutinise and regulate the sexual behaviours of the population.

Central to Foucault’s understanding of sexual subjectivity is the way that such discourses of sexuality do not produce a whole, rational and unitary identity. Rather, the polyvalency of discourse means that subjectivity is insecure, dynamic and multiple. Indeed, for Foucault, the unitary subjectivity of the medico-scientific discourse is a conceptual and political impossibility. The self does not emerge from an internal, pre-given essence. Instead, it derives from a complex, unstable and sometimes conflicting interplay between power-knowledge systems. The self is constantly being produced and reproduced through discursive subject positions that can be normative, subversive or contradictory.

Such a model of sexual subjectivity offers a different means for understanding feminine sexuality than the previously discussed medico-scientific or psychoanalytic frameworks. The multiplicity and instability of
Foucault’s self means that feminine sexuality is no longer a straightforward and uncomplicated product of an internal, pre-given essence. Rather, it is potentially insecure and unstable and open to transformation. Importantly, in such a view, women’s sexuality is not fated to be the passive “other” of men’s sexuality.

Foucault’s contention that sexual identity derives from discourse means that the self comes into existence only through its culture. It exists only when it is fabricated by discourse (Mansfield, 2000: 52) and the only knowledge it can have of itself and the world around it is through discourse. In such a model, the self has no ontological substance and it is for this reason that Mansfield (2000) refers to it as the key “anti-subjective theory” (p. 10). By this he refers to the way that Foucault’s theory suggests that “subjectivity is not a really existing thing, but has been invented by dominant systems of social organisation in order to control and manage us” (Mansfield, 2000: 10). This denial of any “true” substance to the self has attracted sustained criticism (Connell and Dowsett, 1992: 61; McNay, 2000: 2; Armstrong, 2002: 42; Segal, 1994: 227). The poststructural self has no self-reflexive human subjectivity and the only way it can actively resist discourse and demand “liberation from its pathologising scrutiny” is through similar, equally authoritarian discourses (Segal, 1994: 181). Any agential capacity of the self can only emerge from within the omnipotent and seemingly inescapable system of power.
Foucault rejects such criticism, arguing that the network of discourses contains “points of resistance” where the subject can fight against its discursive provocations. For Foucault, the existence of discursive power depends on the “multiplicity of points of resistance” (Foucault, 1976: 95). There can be no network of discourses without the concomitant points of resistance. However, Connell and Dowsett (1992) argue that this claim lacks a substantive account of the “generation, articulation and historical organisation of resistance” (p. 61). In other words, Foucault does not offer a theoretical analysis of where or how such resistance comes about.

The criticism that the poststructural subject lacks agency is closely related to the critique from Segal (1994) and Connell and Dowsett (1992) that the Foucauldian self has no corporeal existence. Foucault views the body and its pleasures as targets of surveillance strategies, yet the nature and substance of those bodies is not addressed (Segal, 1994: 183). For Foucault, bodies and bodily pleasures are simply objects of external manipulation, never entities that deserve analytic exploration in their own right. Connell and Dowsett (1992: 61) argue against the Foucauldian tendency to analyse the experiences of the body as simply discursive effect. For Connell (1987), any theory of gender and sexuality must incorporate the implications of the body since “the body is involved in every kind of social practice” (p. 77).

Finally, although Foucault offers an analysis of the ways in which discourses of sexuality are historically located, he provides no comparable
analysis of the way in which the self is temporally or historically inculcated (McNay, 2000: 17). In Foucault’s framework, the self, by definition, has no capacity to reconcile its conflicting subjective life experience. It is seen as a collection of disjointed, incommensurable subject positions that have little relation to each other or to time. In short, the poststructural self has no coherency and no potential to achieve it. McNay (2000) argues that such a disparate self means that “subjectivity becomes a free-floating and atemporal entity which lacks historical depth” (p. 17). So, although the poststructural self is multiple and shifting, it is not clear what the constraints or boundaries are on the movements involved. There is little account of how the imposition of subject positions is directional or of how some types of subject positions are more durable through time than others. In this way, the Foucauldian subject is multiple but at the same time atemporal: the individual is subjected to a subject position but in no particular order.

Foucault’s model of subjectivity represents the end of the unitary self, or “whole person”, instead introducing the concept of momentary and historically-inculcated identity that conceptualises the person as a fractured, conflicting composite of multiple subject positions. Such a view means that the sexual self is understood as not only socially located, but also conflicted, insecure and, importantly, unfixed. This means that sexual identity is not predetermined and, in this way, feminine sexuality is not fated to be the passive “other” of masculine sexuality.
Feminism and sexuality: the tension between fear and pleasure

The discussion thus far reveals several distinctly different models for understanding sex and subjectivity. The medico-scientific framework and psychoanalysis assert that sexual subjectivity is derived from an interior “substance” that emerges either directly from an individual’s biological constitution or his or her experiences with early familial relations. Foucault, on the other hand, repudiates the existence of such inner “substance”, claiming that sexual identity is an artefact of powerful discourses of sexuality. While it appears that Foucault’s framework offers the most promising avenue for the existence of a feminine self that is not fated to passivity, Foucault engages very little with gender and the way in which discourses themselves might be gendered (Pringle, 1992: 86-87). Indeed, the approaches discussed thus far do not engage with the relationship between sex and subjectivity as an arena central to the making of gender relations. Since the early 1970s, however, with the second wave of the women’s movement, there has been a sustained interest in the issue of sex and subjectivity by feminist scholars. Such inquiry explores sexual subjectivity, its relationship to the production of gender relations, and the way that gender relations limit women’s social participation and expression.

Much feminist scholarly inquiry into sex and subjectivity has been strongly characterised by a theoretical division between those who see sexuality as the source of women’s pain and oppression and those who endeavour to
recognise the positive experiences of female desire and pleasure
(1992), in discussing the uneasy relationship feminism has traditionally
had with sexuality, comments:

Sexual politics have often been understood as a tension between
these two apparent opposites, pleasure and fear. Indeed, in much
recent feminist argument they have been turned into sites to defend
and from which to attack, with ... sexual libertarians defending
pleasure against radical feminists or sexual pessimists for whom
sex is fear (p. 126).

The following discussion explores radical feminist arguments and the
contributions of those feminists who challenge such arguments. In
addition, Judith Butler’s (1990) Foucauldian analysis of gender and identity
is reviewed.

**Sexual politics: Radical feminism and the introduction of gender**

The relationship between sex and gender was first put on the agenda in
1972 with Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*. Here, Millet (1972) redefined
sexuality by placing the individual experience of sex firmly within the socio-
political relations of the social world:

Coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum; although of
itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply
within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged
microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture
subscribes (p. 23).

Millett does not see heterosexual sex as a meaning-neutral physical event.
Rather, to her, it is embedded within meanings that stem from the “power-
structured” character of heterosexual relationships in which men control
women (Millet, 1972: 23). In applying the concept of politics to relations
between men and women, Millet (1972) repudiated the biological sexuality proposed by medico-scientific discourses and reconstructed it as fundamentally characterised by power. For Millett, sexuality was a source of men's domination over women.

Many feminists embraced Millett's ideas about the power relations of sex. Yet, where Millett saw sexuality as only one source of female oppression, in combination with economic, cultural and political sources (Millet, 1972: 24), other feminists came to see sexuality as the primary basis of men's domination over women (Griffen, 1971; Dworkin, 1976, 1987; Brownmiller, 1976; Coveney, 1984). For them, the broad social relations of male domination and female submission were symbolised in the penetration of the vagina by the penis. Accordingly, some radical feminists viewed male sexuality itself as the key source of female oppression (Segal, 1994: 57). Sexuality was analysed in terms of a continuum of male violence where all heterosexual relations were seen to involve elements of female victimisation, violence or rape. The work of Andrea Dworkin (1976) exemplifies this viewpoint, linking sexual violence directly to masculinity and claiming that it “is the very nature of men to aggress sexually against women” (p. 46).

Adrienne Rich (1980) synthesized these radical feminist ideas in her essay Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. This work challenged existing notions about the “natural order” by defining heterosexuality not as the biological arrangement conducive to reproduction, but as a social
institution enforced by men to ensure male dominance (Segal, 1994: 172; Sheridan, 1998: 293). In Rich’s (1980) view, the institution of heterosexuality is a falsehood in which women are “psychologically trapped, trying to fit mind, spirit and sexuality into a prescribed script” (p. 657). Women assume their heterosexuality through coercion and, unaware of their capacity to choose otherwise, are subjected to male sexual violence, exploitation of their labour, and a “lack of collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives” (Rich, 1980: 659). For Rich, the only truth available to women within the system of compulsory heterosexuality is found through the “lesbian continuum” (Sheridan, 1998: 293) where intimate and politically passionate experiences with other women – “women-identified experience” - provides relief from masculine oppression (Rich, 1980: 635).

The radical feminist construction of sexuality persists in the work of contemporary feminists (Jeffreys, 1990, 1996; MacKinnon, 1989, 2001). For instance, Jeffreys (1996) sees women’s sexual desire for men as central to the perpetuation of institutionalised heterosexuality and male supremacy:

> Heterosexual desire is crucial to the political systems of heterosexuality because it gives it the excitements and satisfactions that can be derived from intensity of sexual feeling. The excitement is the excitement of cruelty, of the exploitation of inequality (p. 77).

Jeffreys argues that it is women’s own intensity of feeling – passion and desire – that perpetuates their oppression and upholds male domination.
Radical feminism has a highly political and practical objective - women’s emancipation – and, as such, it has virtually nothing explicit to say about the more elusive question of subjectivity. Nevertheless, it alludes to a relationship between sex and subjectivity in which sex practice is seen to derive directly from a subjectivity that is imposed from the gendered political relations of the social world. Unlike the medico-scientific, psychoanalytic and Foucauldian frameworks, radical feminism advances an inextricable link between sexual identity and gender relations. Yet, it does so through a perspective of gender relations as a simple dichotomy of dominance and submission. As a result, the sexual identity of individuals is reduced to their location within the dichotomy (Connell, 1987; Segal, 1994; Albury, 2000). Compulsory heterosexuality uni-directionally dictates the nature of a person’s ontology: men are bestowed with dominant sexuality, women with passive sexuality. Thus, while the medico-scientific and psychoanalytic frameworks reduce sexual subjectivity to an individual’s reproductive organs, radical feminism reduces it to an individual’s position in the cultural dichotomy of compulsory heterosexuality. Instead of biological reductionism, radical feminism advances a model of cultural reductionism.

The reduction of feminine subjectivity to culture means that individuals are viewed as “actors” that robotically perform their prescribed social function. Importantly, this means that, in the radical feminist view, the feminine self lacks avenues for resistance or individual reflexive action. While Rich (1980) argues that women can choose freedom from male oppression
through the lesbian continuum, this does not really offer a sound route to agency because the lesbian continuum assumes that women’s relationships with each other are harmonious and egalitarian (Sheridan, 1998: 293). Yet, women’s relationships with each other can be characterised by the same prejudice, coercion and violence that can characterise heterosexual relationships and, in this way, the concept of the lesbian continuum is beleaguered by the same cultural reductionism of other radical feminist arguments: reducing broad gender patterns to notions of female mutuality and tolerance and male aggression and coercion.

Moreover, some feminists argue that radical feminist focus on the coercive and cruel aspects of male sexuality leaves little space to theorise issues of feminine sexual pleasure and desire (Albury, 2000; Segal, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 2000; Hollway, 1996). By constructing heterosexual sex as the source of women’s powerlessness, radical feminism fails to understand the way that many women experience comfort, pleasure and love in their relationships with men (Segal, 1994: 67; Segal 1997a: 81). Such arguments carry particular authority in light of the sexological findings outlined in Chapter One that report that a lot of women are happy with their sex lives (Bell, 1974: 119; ASHR, 2003: 2). Moreover, Segal (1997b: 561) points out that the radical feminist contention that heterosexual woman are perpetuating their own powerlessness by having sex with men orchestrates guilt that is little different from that produced by the medico-scientific surveillance of sexuality over the last hundred years.
In sum, both the radical feminist and medico-scientific frameworks view subjectivity as unitary. It applies to, and is possessed by, what is understood to be a whole, intact and united being: the individual person. Such a view of subjectivity means that the self is predestined to its biology or culture. Thus, like the medico-scientific self, the radical feminist self is fated to a non-agential, submissive existence.

The discourse of gender: Judith Butler

The understanding of subjectivity as unitary is radically undermined in the work of Judith Butler (1990), a feminist who has adopted a poststructuralist approach to understanding the role of gender relations in the relationship between sex and subjectivity. Butler uses Foucault's idea of discourse to critique traditional feminist understandings of gender, such as those advanced by Simone de Beauvoir (1952). As Butler argues, these represent gender as the set of cultural meanings ascribed to pre-given sexual or reproductive categories. The social roles of masculinity and femininity are imposed on biological sex distinctions: cultural meanings are ascribed to predetermined biological “fact”. Butler, however, asserts that this relationship may, in fact, be the other way around. She suggests that gendered cultural meanings may produce what we understand to be the biological categories of sex:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established
as “prediscursive”, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts (Butler, 1990: 11).

Butler argues that we are so immersed in the discourses of gendered culture that they cloud understandings of nature and biology. She asserts that when feminists such as de Beauvoir make a distinction between cultural meanings of gender and the actual “truth” of biological sex – that gender is the meaning we ascribe to biological sex - they are, in fact, doing so from within a gendered discourse that deceives us into thinking there is such a biological truth. As Mansfield (2000) comments, “Butler argues that the very identification of a nature and a reality that pre-exists culture is itself a model produced within culture, another ‘culturally instituted fantasy’” (p. 74).

For Butler, the discourses of gender position sexual categories as prediscursive when, in her view, these sexual categories are themselves a discursive effect. In this way, discourses of gender are the main organising structures of the social world (Mansfield, 2000: 74). Gender is a massive system of knowledge from which arise all cultural understandings, including biological sex distinction. The purpose of this massive system of gendered discourse is to incite individuals into gender “performances”. The actions that we undertake to locate ourselves as either masculine or feminine “are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 1990: 173). In other words, gender is performed by individuals to give the impression that one is a “normal” masculine or feminine person (Mansfield,
The purpose of these performances is to maintain the hegemony of the heterosexual matrix or the “binary framework of sex and gender… that consolidates and naturalises the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (Butler, 1990: 44). In Butler’s framework “gender identities are thus both necessitated by and dependent upon the production of sexuality as a stable and oppositional heterosexuality: gender only exists in the service of heterosexism” (Segal, 1994: 190).

Butler clearly locates herself within the poststructural paradigm in using the concept of discourse. With her idea of gender performance, Butler, like Foucault, advances an uncompromising link between discourse and practice. For Butler, all practice is a product of discourse. Individual sexual behaviours are merely “performances” incited or demanded by the omnipotent system of discourse. Yet, while Foucault considers sexual discourse to work in a system with other discourses – medical, legal, psychiatric and so forth - Butler sees discourses of sexuality as an effect of an over-arching system of gendered discourse. Indeed, for Butler, gender is the central organising aspect of the system of social discourse. For her, all discourse is gendered (Mansfield, 2000: 75).

Butler proposes a model of subjectivity that is similar to that advanced by Foucault. For her, the feminine sexual self is constituted by multiple subject positions. It is a complex, insecure and dynamic product of gendered systems of discursive regulation. In this way, women’s sex
practice is determined by normative discourse, yet its determination as such is unstable and women are ostensibly capable of resistance and self-determination. Moreover, for Butler, discourses of feminine sexuality work to incite individuals into normative practices that sustain the heterosexual matrix and, accordingly, she suggests that women do not “own” their sex practices. Rather, they emerge from the massive discursive system of gender whose purpose is to maintain the economic and social relations of compulsory heterosexuality. Here, reminiscent of Foucault, the feminine self is entirely an artefact of discourse and, as Butler (1990) herself asserts, has “no ontological status” apart from discourse (p. 173). As such, women are non-agential “performers” of gendered sexuality in a dominating system of social power, with no corporeality and no agency.

However, like Foucault, Butler asserts that the feminine self does have the capacity for agency. This is offered through her concept of “performance”. In Butler’s view, the hegemonic status of gendered norms is maintained by the continuous reiteration of normative performances and it is in the moments between these reiterations that Butler claims the capacity for agency exists (McNay, 2000: 40). The continuous “copying” of gender norms means that, at times, individual performances deviate from the norm and individuals subvert the hegemony of normative gendered discourse. Butler (1990: 174) uses the example of drag, a parody of gender, to illustrate how gendered discourse can destabilise the heterosexual matrix. Yet, Lois McNay (2000) argues that Butler’s notion of agency through performative parody remains an “abstract potential” and
lacks any “explicit praxeological understanding of agency” (p. 46). In other words, Butler’s account of agency is symbolic and lacks an in-depth social analysis of how the performance of gender identity is lived and practised by individuals in the social world (McNay, 2000: 46).

Foucault’s and Butler’s construction of subjectivity as culturally-located, multiple and potentially subversive has been adopted by some feminists who use it in combination with psychoanalytic concepts to explore the possibilities for an agential feminine sexual subjectivity.

**Desiring feminine sexuality: feminism borrows from Freud and Foucault**

The concepts of discourse and split subjectivity are used by some feminists to refute radical feminist constructions of heterosexuality as fixed dominant-submissive relations. They argue that radical feminism precludes the possibility for an active, desiring feminine sexuality. By instituting psychoanalytic and poststructural concepts, these feminists demonstrate that heterosexual sex can be characterised by pleasure, reciprocity and mutuality and, moreover, feminine sexual subjectivity can be active and desiring.

Feminist scholars advocate for the existence of an active feminine sexuality by exploring the ways that discourses of feminine sexuality have been socially constructed through popular cultural and medical discourse (Tiefer, 2001, 2002, 2004; Tiefer, Hall, and Tavris, 2002; Tolman and Diamond, 2001; Tolman, 2002; Ehrenreich and English, 1978; Walkerdine,
In particular, Lenore Tiefer offers strong critiques of the medical or sexological tendency to operate in the normal/pathological dichotomy, which therein hides the potentialities of human sexuality (Tiefer, 2004). Her work is powerful in revealing the ways in which medical discourse invents new feminine sexual dysfunctions and how these shape women’s sexual experiences (Tiefer, Hall and Tarvis, 2002).

Kath Albury (2000) also advocates for the existence of an active feminine sexual subject. She firmly situates herself within what she calls a “sex-positive” framework in which one can “oppose sexual violence and social inequity and discuss (or even celebrate) sexual pleasure” (Albury, 2000: 26-27). Albury acknowledges that sexual relations are not free from the patriarchal authority that structures women’s lives. However, she argues that in order to fully understand women’s sexual experiences, the ways that sex is easy, fun and pleasurable for women must also be recognised (Albury, 2000: ix). Albury’s main contention is that heterosexual women enjoy sex. They are attracted to sexual experimentation and sexual subcultures such as fetishism, SM, and do-it-yourself pornography. Yet, they are often compelled to keep these interests hidden for fear of being considered immoral, promiscuous or, as some feminist might suppose, a perverse collaborator with the enemy. Thus, because of the cultural sanctions against feminine sexual pleasure, Albury (2000) asserts that “sexual pleasure is just as much a political issue as sexual danger” (p. 192).
In response to the politicisation of feminine sexual pleasure, Albury (2000: 192) proposes the notion of “ethical heterosex” wherein women should be able to freely demand and engage in so called “perverse” or transgressive sexual practice. While the idea of ethical heterosex is attractive, Albury does not offer any insight into how this might be achieved. Indeed, the idea of women being capable of freely asking for perverse sexual practice seems somewhat paradoxical in light of her arguments about the political nature of women’s sexual pleasure. If feminine sexual pleasure is so politically infused, how can the egalitarianism of ethical heterosex be achieved?

Annie Potts (2000, 2001) offers a more persuasive exploration of the potentialities of heterosexuality. She uses the feminist psychoanalytic concept of the Moebius strip, developed by Grosz (1994) (see also Lyotard, 1993) to understand how sexual subjectivities are embodied. The Moebius strip model problematises traditional models of subjectivity that view the human subject as split between mind and body. Instead, with the Moebius strip, the boundaries between inside and outside are blurred and, thus, sexual subjectivities can be linked to the exterior, affording the subject corporeality (Potts, 2001: 146-147). Potts uses such a model to explore how hegemonic heterosexual male corporealities are produced (Potts, 2001). In particular, she highlights the way that men exteriorise their sexual subjectivity and thereby distance themselves from the behaviours of their bodies during sex.
Jane Ussher (1994, 1997a, 1997b) also emphasises the centrality of the bodily or material aspects of sex in the making of sexual subjectivities. She grounds herself firmly within psychoanalytic and poststructural theoretical concepts, interested in the ways that women resist “the narrow scripts of femininity which are currently on offer” (Ussher, 1997a: 441). She explores the cultural images of women and sex through a framework that views gender as a relational structure, explaining that in order “to understand what it is to be ‘woman’ we also have to look at what it is to be ‘man’, at men’s fantasies, fears and desires in relation to women, and their own (mythical) phallic sexuality” (Ussher, 1997a: 5). For Ussher (1997a), the cultural discourses of masculine and feminine sexuality are irrevocably connected. She uses this concept of relationality to explore how feminine sexuality is shaped and regulated by the masculine “gaze” and the ways in which women resist being positioned as sexual objects or victims. The gender relationality in Ussher’s work is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic assertion that sexuality is the key source of gender difference. For Ussher (1997a), it is sexual difference that maintains the “phallocentric social order” and women’s sexuality must be understood in relation to this.

Lynne Segal (1994, 1997a, 1999, 2000) also uses psychoanalytic concepts in her analysis of feminine sexuality. For her, the continual and precarious repression of unconscious desires means that there is a chronic capacity to undermine consciously learned norms and, consequently, the hegemonic discourses of femininity are insecure (Segal, 2000: 119). Segal (2000) argues that it is in sexual practice that the
subversion of feminine norms is most likely to occur: “it has always been in
desired sexual encounter, of whatever kind, that the presumed polarities of
gender can be felt to falter and blur” (p. 119). In other words, it is in the
immersion of sexual pleasure that women – and men – can be released
from normative codes of behaviour.

What is critical in the work of feminists such as Potts, Ussher and Segal is
their emphasis on the corporeality of sex and it is this that sets their work
apart. For instance, while Ussher (1997b: 167) recognises the centrality of
symbolic representation in the “making” of women’s sexual experiences,
she also asserts the need to understand the corporeality of sex. She
demonstrates this with her analysis of the role of the penis in heterosex
and the way in which “the action of the penis has come to stand for ‘sex’
and its ability to perform” (Ussher, 1997b: 167). Here, she argues that it is
the physical entity – the penis – that shapes the sexual experience.

Segal also offers a strong materialist argument for understanding sex. She
is critical of the poststructural tendency to lose “the sensual and fleshy
reality” of the body (Segal, 1994: 227). The emphasis on the socio-
political, discursive construction of sexuality means the body “keeps
disappearing into the discourses which construct it” (Segal, 1994: 227).
Segal stresses that bodies encode cultural meanings and these meanings
are implicated in sexual practice. For instance, she notes how
menstruation signifies the loss of girlhood and the achievement of
“womanhood” (Segal, 1994: 230). For Segal, bodies are not the meaning-
neutral “vessels” that poststructuralism proposes, waiting for meaning to be inscribed from the social exterior. Instead, “bodies themselves are implicated in the inscriptions they receive, and women’s distinctive reproductive cycle and genital anatomy give them particular possibilities and vulnerabilities” (Segal, 1994: 233). For her, recognising the body and its experiences is central to understanding sexuality. Culture imposes meanings on bodies that are themselves significant in defining sex experiences.

It is through psychoanalysis and her interest in the corporeal that Segal views heterosexuality as a series of multiple, unstable and potentially transgressive practices. In borrowing from queer theory, she sees that the binary hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity are maintained through heterosex. But, while queer theorists claim that it is gay sex that undermines the hegemony of heterosexuality, Segal (1994: 254-256) argues that it is, in fact, heterosex that has the greatest potential to undermine gendered binaries. She argues that queer theorists have gone wrong in conceptualising heterosexuality as unified and stable:

"There are gentle, caring, celibate, submissive, unassertive, dependent, passive men, just as there are lusty, authoritative, aggressive, insensitive, dominating, independent and assertive women. We all criss-cross these supposedly gendered lines, displaying greater variation within our own sex than between sexes." (Segal, 1994: 283)

For Segal, it is precisely when heterosexual norms are challenged from within the structure of heterosexuality itself that the greatest threat to its hegemony is presented. When considering the corporeality of sex,
“straight sex, with its tactile, olfactory, oral and visual bodily connections, can be no less ‘perverse’ than its ‘queer’ alternatives” (Segal, 1994: 318).

Despite the emphasis on the corporeality of sex, both Ussher’s and Segal’s work allude to a model of subjectivity that is based on psychoanalytic principles and, as such, it is similar to Freud’s split self. Sex practice is seen as a product of an interiorly-located, conflicted and insecure split subjectivity and they argue that the hegemony of passive feminine sexuality can be undermined by the instability of such an identity. Lois McNay (2000: 14), however, criticises such an approach, arguing that it remains too firmly within abstract symbolism. She proposes that, in following psychoanalytic thought, feminists are fated to understand sexual difference “principally as instability within meaning systems and not, in more sociological terms, as the differentiated power relations constitutive of the social realm” (McNay, 2000: 14). She claims that feminist psychoanalysts do not fully recognise how symbolic meanings are intrinsically entangled with the actual “material” practices of people within the social world. Gatens (1991) offers a similar critique when she suggests the feminist tendency to reduce the feminine subject to her sexuality “is, after all, what historically dominant discourses on women have done” (p. 132). Thus, in order to fully understand feminine sexuality, McNay and Gatens propose that it is important to make substantial theoretical links between the symbolic meaning systems of gender and the material practices that sustain them.
Nonetheless, the work of contemporary feminists such as Potts, Tolman, Tiefer, Ussher and Segal work offer substantial grounds from which the possibilities for feminine agency can be discussed. Significantly, they advance an alternative discourse to the prevailing concepts of women as sexual objects or victims. Their analyses clarify the disjunctions and shortcomings of the psychoanalytic and poststructural frameworks in understanding feminine sexual agency, and point towards stronger links across theoretical disciplines.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored some of the key theoretical frameworks for understanding sex and its relationship to subjectivity. The medico-scientific framework and psychoanalysis assert that feminine sexual subjectivity derives from an interior “substance” that emerges either directly from a woman’s biological constitution or her experiences with early familial relations. Foucault, on the other hand, repudiates the existence of such inner “substance”, claiming that sexual identity is an artefact of the powerful discourses of sexuality that make up the social world. However, none of these frameworks successfully engage with the way in which feminine sexual identity might be constituted through gender relations. Some feminist frameworks offer substantial insight here by suggesting that sexual subjectivity emerges from symbolic representations of sexual difference and the effect of these on the material body.
Yet, none of these frameworks provide a full understanding of the way that feminine sexual subjectivity is social, historical, relational, corporeal and, importantly, agential. While some feminist inquiry is significant in demonstrating how feminine sexuality emerges from socially-produced gender relations, it does not fully explore how these gender relations are played out praxeologically in the everyday bodily practices of women. By introducing the concept of embodiment, the following chapter addresses this by exploring the role of the body in the production of gendered sexual subjectivities. Indeed, it is through the body that a more substantial link between the symbolic and material worlds is made and, as will be argued, a more comprehensive model of agential feminine sexuality emerges.
Chapter Three

Subjectivity and gendered structures of practice: linking the material and the symbolic

This chapter reviews the work of theorists who suggest that human experiences can be fully understood only by linking the symbolic and material worlds; that is, only by understanding how the symbolism of the social world is lived out in a corporeal sense. Such an approach resolves the predicament that emerged in the previous chapter where theories of sexual identity, in the effort to avoid biological reductionism, reduce the self to its culture. Poststructuralists reduce the self to systems of discursive power, psychoanalysts reduce the self to innate drives and early familial relations, and feminists, in following either Freud or Foucault, reduce the feminine self to either biology or, in the case of Butler, an “empty vessel” with no ontological substance. The theories discussed in this chapter provide a way out of such a predicament by giving central importance to bodily practice. Here, the body is not viewed as a discursive product nor a meaning-neutral biological machine but, rather, “a corporeal phenomenon, which not only is affected by the social system but also forms a basis for and shapes social relations” (Seymour, 1998: 10). In
other words, bodies are not just acted upon by the social domain but are an intrinsic constituent in shaping it. This view of the body enables material connections to be made between the symbolic social power systems that regulate women’s lives and the actual sex experiences of the women being “regulated”. By focussing on bodily practice, the theories of practice provide understanding for the ways that the body is both inscribed by and generative of social meaning. In other words, they demonstrate how the individual is shaped by the social world but also has the capacity to shape the social world.


**The foundations of embodiment: Bourdieu and Sartre**

Part of the groundwork for the concept of embodiment can be found in the work of Jean Paul Sartre (1958, 1967, 1976) and Pierre Bourdieu (1974). Both are interested in the relationship between social structure and individual practice (Connell, 1987: 62) and, while poststructuralism focuses on the *determinants* of practice, Sartre and Bourdieu are
interested also in the consequences of practice. They emphasise the importance not only of understanding how discourse shapes practice but also how practice has consequences that can potentially transform hegemonic discourse.

Sartre (1967) seeks to understand the collective human experience through history and the individual’s relation to this history. In *Search for a Method* (1967) he refers to this endeavour as “the project” wherein “the most rudimentary behaviour must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which is trying to bring it into being” (Sarte, 1967: 91). For Sartre, the totality of human experience is understood only when considering both the sources of behaviour and the consequences.

At the centre of Sartre’s “project” is his commitment to human agency. He refutes the Marxist formulation that people are mere products of their social world, believing that people themselves are active and creative subjects of their own existence:

> Idealist Marxism seems to have chosen the easiest interpretation: entirely determined by prior circumstances – that is, in the final analysis, by economic conditions – man is a passive product, a sum of conditioned reflexes (Sarte, 1967: 85).

Sartre objects to the failure of some Marxists to locate human existence within an historical framework. For him, people cannot be passive products of a phenomenon that they themselves are a part of producing. He asserts that man [sic] is “at once both the product of his own product
and a historical agent who can under no circumstances be taken as a product” (Sartre, 1967: 87). In Sartre’s view, the meaning of human existence can be found at the intersection of the social world acting upon us, and our own agential actions upon the social world.

Like Sartre, Bourdieu’s (1974) ideas of *habitus* and *field* link corporeal practices and social structure in a manner that requires the participation of an agential human self (McNay, 2000: 23). Habitus refers to the way in which the individual is inscribed with and regulated by prevailing social meanings (McNay, 2000: 36). Bourdieu (1974) describes habitus as the “system of durable, transposable dispositions” (p. 72) or “states of being”. It is a series of “tendencies, propensities or inclinations” (Bourdieu, 1974: 214) towards certain actions or practices. The individual is forever engaged by the habitus which continually provides “options” through which the individual can act. In this way, Bourdieu (1974) suggests that habitus is a *generative* structure in that it generates “practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in anyway being the product of obedience to rules” (p. 72). Thus, habitus is distinct from discourse in that it does not simply inscribe the body with meaning. Rather, it is the mechanism by which social meanings are “lived through” by the individual (McNay, 2000: 36).

The corporeal dispositions of habitus emerge from broad social circumstances or the field. Bourdieu argues that the field is similar to the notion of “society” but involves a more differentiated configuration in that it
is an historically compiled “ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres of ‘play’ that cannot be collapsed under an overall societal logic” (Bourdieu and Loic, 1998: 17). Thus, the field is the system of social forces that regulate and shape the objects and agents that live within it.

It is in the “double obscure” relationship between individual habitus and field that the generative nature of habitus, and the consequent potential for an agential self, emerges (McNay, 2000: 38). On one side of the relationship, the objective meanings of the field operate to structure the nature of habitus and, on the other, habitus “is constitutive of the field in that it endows the latter with meaning, with ‘sense and value’, in which it is worth investing one’s energy” (McNay, 2000: 38). Thus, habitus and the field function only in relation to one another. The field is a space that exists only “to the extent that players enter into it who believe in and actively pursue the prizes it offers” (Bourdieu and Loic, 1998: 19). Meanwhile, habitus exists only when there are agential subjects to incorporate and actively interpret the meanings endowed by the field.

Neither Sartre nor Bourdieu explore these ideas in relation to gender and sexuality. In this respect, Connell (1987, 1995), Matthews (1984, 1992) and McNay (2000) offer theories of subjectivity and gender relations that are situated in terms of bodies and practice, focussing not only on the sources of individual practice, but also on the consequences of practice.
Connell: The body and gendered practice

Influenced by the work of Sartre, among others, Connell (1987, 1995, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1992, 1993) explores the ways that the body is implicated in gendered practice. He outlines what he sees as the transcendental capacity of the body wherein all bodily practice has the potential to transform social meaning. Reminiscent of Sartre, Connell (1987) explains:

What practice produces is not what it began with. The qualities of objects are changed, whether they are bits of wood or human beings. The bits of wood become a chair; the human being becomes a lover, or angry or better educated. A transforming practice in a basic sense negates what it starts with in order to produce something new. This negation and supersession is the basis of historicity. For the outcomes of practice do not sit around outside time, but they themselves become the grounds of new practice (p. 78-79).

Here, Connell refers to a process in which practice is intrinsically transformative. Each bodily practice we undertake has the potential to change the social meaning associated with that practice. In his later work, he terms this process “body-reflexive practice” in as much as bodies are both the objects and agents of practice (Connell, 1995: 61). Thus, bodies have the potential to engage the social meanings attached to our practices and thereby possibly subvert or transform these meanings.

It is important to note how Connell’s analysis of the gendered body departs from the corporeality described in Ussher’s and Segal’s work. Their account suggests a relationship in which the body’s role is to constrain the kind of social meaning that is inscribed on the body. So, for
instance, women’s reproductive anatomy gives them certain possibilities in terms of the kind of social inscriptions female bodies receive (Segal, 1994: 233). In this way, the body is seen as an object on which meaning is inscribed uni-directionally. Meaning is applied from the social exterior, just applied differently to women’s bodies than to men’s. On the other hand, Connell’s analysis suggests the body has a productive role in meaning-creation. It is not only the object of social meaning but it is also constitutive of social meaning.

Connell situates the transformative potential of the body within an account of the institutionalised social relations in which bodily practice occurs. He outlines the ways in which schools, hospitals, families, governments and other social institutions serve to maintain the dominant social meanings that perpetuate gendered differences (Connell, 1987: 120). Within this hegemonic system, bodily practice becomes predominantly replicative. Institutions serve to sustain certain kinds of gendered practices such as women’s responsibilities for childcare or men’s affiliation with physical sport. They shape practice so that subsequent practice is similar to previous practice and patterns of gender are sustained.

Connell’s construction of social institutions does not have the same kind of ahistorical rigidity of the radical feminist understanding of “institution”. Rather, Connell (1987) explains that an institution is, in fact, organised practice that is cyclical:
Practice is of the moment. What persists is the organisation or structure of practice, its effect on subsequent practice. This can either depart from, or reproduce, the initial situation; that is to say, practice can be divergent or cyclical... it is not a logical requirement that social reproduction occurs; that is simply a possible empirical outcome. But it is an important one, and the cyclical practice that produces it is what is meant by an 'institution' (p. 141).

In Connell’s view, institutions are products of practice, or large-scale “collective practices” (Connell, 1987: 222), that are susceptible to the same transformative capacities of the body as is the practice of individuals.

In this framework gender is not conceived of as a static “structure”. Rather, Connell sees it as a structure of practice. What we understand to be gender is, for Connell (1987: 79), practice that is organised in relation to the division of people based on their reproductive anatomy. Gender practice is evident in how we mark sex difference through dress, hairstyle, or make-up. It is evident in the sexual division of labour with patterns that position women as responsible for housework and childcare (Connell, 1987: 99); in how our governments and businesses are structured, usually with men in positions of power (Connell, 1987: 107); and also in the ways that we participate in emotional relationships, for instance, where men are positioned as rational and women as emotional (Connell, 1987: 111). In effect, these practices are constitutive of what is perceived to be gender “structure”. They are practices that define and shape the social relations between men and women.
In speaking specifically about sex, Connell argues that sexual practices are an arena of gender relations production. Here, sexual practices are a form of gendered practice, shaped through what he calls the “structure of cathexis” or the social structure that shapes the kind of emotional attachment individuals have to others (Connell, 1987: 112). For instance, the social dominance of heterosexual desire and the prohibition against homosexuality, incest, or rape are all aspects of the structure of cathexis that determine the kinds of relationships in which sexual practice can and cannot occur. Cathexis sustains the normative sexual practice of heterosexual desire within monogamous relationships. But, as Connell asserts, heterosexual relationships are not simply based on difference between men and women. Rather, they “are specifically unequal” (Connell, 1987: 113) and, in this way, social power is an intrinsic constituent of sexual practice, just as it is in all gendered practice. Thus, in an argument somewhat reminiscent of Rich’s (1980), Connell sees that sexual practices are rooted within the hegemony of heterosexuality: heterosexuality and its “other”, homosexuality, serve to define “the social category within which a partner can be chosen. Perhaps the implication is that both are constructed mainly by blocking out the category from which the partner is not to be drawn” (Connell, 1987: 114).

Connell’s construction of sex as a “kind” of gendered practice is challenged by Dowsett (1996: 114) who argues that the privileging of gender as the central structuring feature of sexual practice is heterosexist. Dowsett (1996) contends that linking sex practice to social symbols of
gendered power and “male penetrative dominance” (p. 114), has little value when it comes to understanding the sexual practices of gay men. Indeed, Dowsett rightly discerns that Connell’s construction of sex as gendered practice is reminiscent of radical feminist links between sexuality and gender. But, because Connell focuses on the existential nature of bodily practice, he successfully avoids the rigid link between sex and gender advanced by radical feminism and, in this way, he does not contend that gender determines sex practice. Rather, for Connell, while sex practice usually reproduces gender structure, there is an ever-present possibility that it can diverge from or subvert gender structure. Indeed, Connell argues that it is in sex practice that the greatest potential for transformation exists. As he explains, while the other structures that organise gender relations “can be the objects of practice; with cathexis, it commonly is. One of the striking things about sexuality is that the structure itself can be cathected” (Connell, 1987: 115). For example, fetishism is a practice wherein “the symbolic markers of social categories (lace handkerchiefs, high-heeled shoes, leather jackets)... get detached from their contexts and themselves become a primary object of arousal” (Connell, 1987: 115). In Connell’s view, the entrenched cultural patterns of gender difference commonly become the object of sexual attachment. Thus, while sex practice often reproduces gender structure, it is by no means reducible to it and, indeed, provides the greatest potential for transforming the social symbols of gender.
Matthews: Obligatory heterosexuality

Connell’s interest in bodies and gendered practice is shared by Jill Matthews in her concept of “obligatory heterosexuality” (Matthews, 1992), which derives from Rich’s (1980) “compulsory heterosexuality”. Matthews replaces the term “compulsory” with the notion of obligation in order to relax the link between reproduction and heterosexuality that underlies Rich’s version. As Matthews (1992) asserts, the reproductive requirement of compulsory heterosexuality “has loosened somewhat and, while still centrally important, is no longer imperative for women” (p. 127). The term, obligation, instead implies that, while women are not robotically coerced into relationships with men, they are still compelled to fulfil their feminine expectations, to “occupy given positions in given relationships” that are usually established according to male-dominated heterosexuality (Matthews, 1992: 128).

Matthews’s notion of obligation introduces an impression of temporality and active participation in the making of feminine identity. Women are not mere “actors” of the workings of male patriarchy but are, in fact, participants in the making of their own femininity. Matthews (1992) alludes to this when she writes “one cannot be simply an individual, but must become a woman of a particular sort, fit to occupy the particular position” (p. 128) [emphasis added]. In other words, it is through a woman’s practice that she assumes a certain kind of femininity within the domain of obligatory heterosexuality. Using Bourdieu’s terms, the system of obligatory heterosexuality offers a series of feminine dispositions from
which the agential feminine self can actively engage. Matthews (1992) uses the example of young women negotiating sexual encounters to further explain the relation between women’s practice and obligatory heterosexuality:

[Safe sex] education is understood to be the instruction of an individual, a rational agent, a self-determining subject: effectively a man. But a young woman knows that she won’t get a boyfriend if she’s a man. She is embraced in a relationship with her future that obliges her at this moment not to be assertive, not to initiate, not to say ‘no’, or ‘if it’s not on, it’s not on’ (p. 129) [emphasis added].

Evident here is the way that Matthews believes that women play a constitutive part in gaining their feminine subjectivity. In negotiating sex, girls are obliged to say “yes”. The practice of saying yes constitutes them as adults. Indeed, willingly accepting the obligation to sustain heterosexuality constitutes girls as adults (Matthews, 1992: 129). The notion of obligation implies that girls have, at least in part, choices about taking up their heterosexual obligations. As Matthews implies in the preceding quote, it is in the moment of practice that these choices can be exercised and, indeed, the feminine agent is most evident.

**McNay’s generative model of an agential feminine subjectivity**

The theories of practice outlined here are able to locate the self within its social world without eradicating its capacity for agency or, indeed, its subjectivity altogether. A focus on bodily practice means that links can be made between the actions of individuals and the social power relations that make up their material worlds. Theorisation of the body provides a
means to depart from the symbolic abstractions that beleaguer the work of theorists such as Foucault and Freud and to conceptualise social control and individual resistance as material or substantive practices (McNay, 2000: 14). As McNay (2000) argues, the theorisation of the body means that subjectivity can be understood “not in one-sided terms as an exogenously imposed effect but as a result of a lived relation between embodied potentiality and material relations” (p. 16).

By conceptualising social control and individual resistance as practice, these theories bestow the self with an inherent temporality. McNay uses Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field to describe the emergence of embodied subjectivity from the temporality of practice. In quoting Bourdieu (1974), she explains that “practice generates time: ‘time is engendered in the actualisation of the act’” (McNay, 2000: 40). In other words, time is an inbuilt constituent of action and, for McNay (2000), this means that the self is not just inscribed by the social world but is instead generated through it. The self is produced and reproduced through the “moment of praxis or living through” (McNay, 2000: 36) of social potentialities or habitus. More importantly, the “double obscure” relation (McNay, 2000: 38) between habitus and field – wherein the field and habitus are constitutive of each other – means that there are uncertainties in the potentialities or dispositions that are lived out and, in this way, gaining a “selfhood” is an interpretive and participatory process, not an imposed and repetitive one.
This intrinsic potential for agency is the focus of McNay’s generative model of subjectivity. The embodied self is bestowed with a sense of self-awareness and reflexivity that enables it to potentially transcend its material conditions (Armstrong, 2002: 44). The conceptualisation of the body as the “dynamic and mutable frontier” between the symbolic and the material domains means that the “subject is constituted through dominant norms but is not reducible to them” (McNay, 2000: 32-33). In short, for McNay, Connell and others, the self is constituted by social relations but it also plays an agential and dynamic role in its own constitution.

McNay suggests that the agential capacity of the embodied self has significant implications for feminists and the search for an active feminine subjectivity. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field mean that gender identity can be conceptualised in terms other than the dichotomy of domination and submission that other theories propose. As McNay (2000) notes, the binaries of domination and submission do not go far in explaining newly emerged notions of femininity that include autonomy and sexual self-assurance. On the other hand, Bourdieu’s concepts allow a construction of gender that is “not a mechanistically determining structure but an open system of dispositions – regulated liberties – that are ‘durable but not eternal’” (McNay, 2000: 58). The feminine self, then, is not everlastingly delegated to a position of submission but, rather, is actively engaged in a tenuous process in which there are opportunities to claim a more active feminine disposition.
A unitary or multiple self? The narrative coherency of the embodied self

The embodied self of McNay’s generative model is not the unitary self of Descartes; yet, it is also not the divided self of Freud or the multiple self of Foucault. Instead, it occupies a middle ground where it has a corporeal and “self-reflexive” substance similar to the unitary self, but is also acted upon by multiple and contradicting social regulatory forces, like those involved in the Freudian and Foucauldian process of identity construction. On this issue, McNay (2000) proposes that the embodied self is neither completely unitary nor multiple. Rather, it is a self that “has unity but it is the dynamic unity of change through time” (p. 27).

McNay’s assertion that the self has a sense of unification is based on Paul Ricoeur’s (1983, 1991, 1992) contention that ontological status derives from the act of narration. Ricoeur suggests that narrative is the means through which individuals gain a sense of coherent identity through time (McNay, 2000: 85). Narrative is the main way in which humans understand the temporality of existence and instil a sense of permanence into the variabilities of meaning and experience. For Ricoeur, narration is not, however, the straightforward articulation of human experience. The act of narration also bestows meaning on experience and, in this way, narrative becomes a constitutive, irreducible component of meaning-creation and identity formation (McNay, 2000: 86). Thus, narration is simultaneously a practice that attempts to unify experience and a practice that endows
meaning on an experience. In short, narrative integrates meaning and, at the same time, changes it.

Ricoeur’s concept of the narrative generation of subjectivity demonstrates his affinity with Sartre (1967) and Bourdieu (1974), and it is from here that McNay conceives of narration as a temporally-inculcated embodied act. Ricoeur’s emphasis on narrative as an act that is produced from human experience and generative of future experience, an act with “anticipatory dimensions” (McNay, 2000: 23), firmly locates him within the existentialist paradigm of Sartre (1967), Bourdieu (1974), Connell (1987) and others. For Ricoeur, it is in the act of “talking about” one’s experience that the meanings attached to that experience can be transformed and, thereby, have the capacity to change future actions.

Ricoeur’s suggestion that narrative integrates the stasis of time with the instability and variability of human experience means that, for McNay, the kind of subjectivity to arise from the act of narration is both static and fluctuating. The self has neither complete static unity, like the Cartesian self, nor does it have complete sporadic disunity, like the Foucauldian or Freudian self. Rather it has what McNay (2000) calls “dynamic unity” (p. 89). She asserts that the practice of narration undoes “the attendant dichotomy between fixity and contingency. Identity is neither completely in flux nor static; it has the dynamic unity of narrative configuration” (McNay, 2000: 89). So, McNay’s concept of “dynamic unity” captures an aspect of subjectivity that is missing in other frameworks: the way in which the
multiple subject positions created by social discourse are integrated and reconciled to produce a coherent “selfhood”. Indeed, for McNay, people do not experience life as a cacophony of multiple, conflicting and unstable subject positions, as the Foucauldian model suggests. Rather, in their attempts to make sense of their lives, people seek to integrate their variable and sometimes conflicting experiences and become whole, coherent beings.

**Embodied sex and agential feminine sexuality**

The theories of practice offer a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality than that offered through medico-scientific discourse, poststructuralism or psychoanalysis. The key feature underpinning such theories is bodily action and the time inherent in such action. This focus on bodily practice allows a link between social meanings and the individual, material practices that are constituted by and, at the same time, constitutive of them. The element of time, or “moments of praxis” as McNay calls it, permits the reflexive and agential self to emerge. Such a combination of time and practice engenders what Sartre calls “the project” where individual life experiences are generated through the complex relation between the social exterior and the agency of the individual.

In such a framework, sex practice is not a uniform, stable, straightforward expression of either biologically or culturally derived subjectivity. Nor is it a disorderly product of a multiple, fractured and incommensurable subject with no true ontological status. Rather, sex practice derives from the
embodied self, who is at once socially-located, corporeal, and agential. In this framework, feminine sexuality is not destined to passivity. Women are not fated to be sexual objects or victims but, rather, have the potential to be active, desiring and pleasure-seeking agents in the making of their own sexual experiences.

**Conclusion**

The exploration of subjectivity, sex and gender carried out in this chapter offers the most persuasive understanding feminine sexuality as social, historical, relational, corporeal and, importantly, agential. With their focus on the corporeal through time, the theories of practice capture the ways in which subjectivity is both socially inscribed and self-reflexive. Such a view of subjectivity means that women’s sex practice is not wholly determined by biology or culture. Rather, through bodily practice women are accorded agency that potentially permits sexual freedom and self-determination. Accordingly, this framework provides the theoretical starting point and the methodological basis of this research project. The following chapter links the theoretical platform outlined here to the research questions, methods and practices that constitute this study.
Chapter Four

Crafting questions, seeking answers: Issues of epistemology, methodology and methods

This chapter describes the research processes and procedures that brought this study into being. It begins by identifying the epistemology embedded in the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. This epistemological position informs the research design, the method of data collection, and the data analysis. The chapter then outlines the research objectives and describes how these are addressed by an integrated research strategy of grounded theory and progressive-regressive method. It is in this context that the method of life history interviews and narrative analysis are described. The chapter concludes with a brief introduction to each of the eighteen study participants.

Epistemological starting points

Chapter Three argued that feminine sexuality is socially and historically situated, yet not mechanically and totalisingly determined by culture. It asserted that the body is central in shaping sexual subjectivity and
engendering the sexual self with the potential to be, at least partly, self-
determining. Such an understanding suggests that people’s sense of
sexual identity is fluid and dynamic and, importantly, formed through a
highly relational process of bodies interrelating with the social world. This
theoretical framework is founded in the epistemological view that human
experiences, and the meanings people ascribe to them, emerge from a
dynamic and fundamentally collaborative social process. That is, it is
founded in a non-positivist epistemology that makes central the way that
meaning is an entity produced by people, through their practices and
social interactions (Jaffe and Miller, 1994: 54).

Much previous sexuality research is founded in positivist epistemology or
“the epistemological view that things exist as meaningful entities, that they
have truth and meaning residing in them as objects, and that careful
research can attain that objective truth and meaning” (Crotty, 1998: 5-6).
Certainly, sexology takes such a view in claiming the existence of an
identifiable and knowable underlying pattern of sexual behaviour, which
can be elucidated through a careful and concise documentation of the
sexual acts of individuals. Social researchers of sexuality take issue with
such categorising and counting and assert that the processes of sexuality
“require a keener sense of the ‘content’ of sexuality as being far more
diverse than the sex acts themselves” (Dowsett, 1996: 38; also see
Gagnon and Parker, 1995). Ken Plummer (2001) fervently rejects the
positivist claim to the existence of an objective and identifiable sexual. For
him, it is the fundamentally human experiences of the body and emotion –
ecstasy, sadness, pleasure, pain, remorse - that are the key to understanding sexual subjectivity. A denial of such experiences precludes the possibility of understanding the truly subjective and agential nature of human sexual experience.

Likewise, feminists criticise traditional forms of positivist research for their tendency to hide women’s experiences as gendered beings. For feminists, non-positivist epistemology affords fuller understanding of women’s experiences, as they are filtered through hegemonic masculinist culture, language and practice (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984; Minister, 1991; Anderson and Jack, 1991; Olesen, 1994; Kelly et al., 1994; Pilcher and Coffey, 1996; Robinson and Richardson, 1997). One of the key features of feminist epistemology is that

a person’s reflection is not just a private, subjective act. The categories and concepts we use for reflecting upon and evaluating ourselves come from a cultural context, one that has historically demeaned and controlled women’s activities (Anderson and Jack, 1991: 18).

Feminist epistemology, therefore, recognises that women’s meanings are embedded within cultural understandings and conversational structures that are male-dominated.

The objective of this study - to explore feminine sexual subjectivity as a social, relational and bodily experience - thus necessitated situating the research within a non-positivist epistemology. In doing so, the study proceeded on the understanding that meaning is created through a collaborative social process in which human beings are an integral part in
creating their own knowledge. This philosophical approach established the parameters within which the study’s research questions were formulated. It informed the methodology adopted and the methods of data collection and analysis selected.

**Research questions**

This project broadly aimed to explore women’s sexual experiences with men and the social relations that shape them, with a view towards examining how women themselves are agential in shaping their sexual experiences and sexual subjectivity. Three key research questions underpin this aim:

1. What discourses do women use to make sense of their sexual experiences?
2. How are these discourses related to women’s sex practice?
3. What is the relationship between women’s sex practice and their sexual identity? And how is such identity brought into being?

Preliminary research themes were developed to set the research process in motion. It was expected that these might become more or less important as data collection and analysis proceeded, but provided important starting points for the initial interviews. These preliminary themes included:

- the role of discourse in women’s sexual experiences;
- the role of bodies in women’s sexual experiences;
- the role of men’s and women’s relationships in constituting women’s sexual experiences; and
- the ways in which the meanings women attribute to their sexual experience change over their life time.
Choosing a methodology: Grounded theory meets existentialism

Choosing the appropriate methodology is central to the strength of a research design. Methodology can be thought of as the tool that provides the link between the research question and the chosen method of collecting data. As Morse (1994) explains, “each qualitative strategy offers a particular and unique perspective that illuminates certain aspects of reality more easily than others and produces a type of result more suited to some applications than others” (p. 223). In other words, the methodology chosen is determinant of the type of data obtained and, ultimately, the usefulness of that data in answering the research questions. The methodology for this study consisted of a synthesis of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory and Sartre’s (1967) progressive-regressive method. This integrated methodology provided the conceptual tools to formulate a data collection strategy suitable for answering the research questions.

Grounded theory is a general strategy of research that aims to systematically “discover” theory from data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 2). Founded on a logic of constant comparison, grounded theory aims to generate plausible relationships and concepts from data through a process of “continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 273). Data collection and analysis happen concurrently and dynamically as themes that emerge from the data analysis serve to modify and guide the collection of subsequent data. In
this way, grounded theory is an interpretive and inductive research
process wherein constant theoretical questioning produces “conceptually
dense” theory that ultimately sheds light on the research question (Strauss

Strauss and Corbin (1994) refer to grounded theory as a general
methodology in that it is “a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data”
(p. 273). They suggest that its generality allows researchers to adapt it
according to the specific interests of the research question (Strauss and
Corbin, 1994: 276). Such adaptability meant that I was able to incorporate
Sartre’s progressive-regressive method (Sartre, 1967), which, like
grounded theory, aims to glean theory from actual human experience but
does so by situating “a particular subject or class of subjects within a given
historical moment” (Denzin, 1989: 200). Progressive-regressive
methodology derives directly from Sartre’s understanding of the human life
as “the project”, as discussed in the previous chapter. Here, the focus is
on linking broad social structure to individual practice and the ways in
which individual experiences are seen to have both sources and
consequences. Plummer (2001) describes Sartre’s strategy as one of
“totalisation” where a life is imagined in its entirety:

This method is a way of reading a life through moving both
backwards (to sources and conditions in class, race, gender,
emotion, etc.) and forwards (to pragmatics and consequences) from
a key event in a person’s life – linking all this to wider issues of
history and culture throughout (p. 165).

At the centre of Sartre’s progressive-regressive approach is time. It does
not allow a view of life experiences as separate, free-floating events.
Rather, the strategy links experiences, sees them as predicated on previous experiences and constitutive of subsequent ones. Here, all life events are connected by the central element of time. Of equal importance in the progressive-regressive method is its capacity to reveal human agency. The approach makes central the human agent by focussing on individual practice and the way that it shapes subsequent experiences. In sum, the progressive-regressive method discloses how experiences and meanings emerge from the social world acting upon individuals, the individual’s own agential actions upon the social world and the way this relationship exists through time.

Applying grounded theory secured the theoretical integrity of the findings by ensuring that the findings were generated systematically from the data. The progressive-regressive strategy permitted insight into the ways in which women experience sex within an historical framework and how individual choice and self-reflexivity shape subjective experience. Implementing such an integrated research strategy generated data that revealed how sex is a subjectively experienced, dynamic, and unfolding phenomenon that is linked to social structure and culture, yet is also constituted through human agency.

**Method of data collection: The life history interview**

Following from the integrated research strategy, the life history interview was chosen as the data collection method. Like other qualitative interview methods, the life history interview captures the dynamic and subjective
aspects of people’s experiences. Crucially, however, the life history interview also captures the temporal dynamics of such experiences by locating the individual within an historical framework. Moreover, life history interviews elicit narratives about “self-identity” (Russell, 2001; Plummer, 2001) and in this way allowed me to trace the development of subjectivity through the life time.

**The life history interview**

The first practical task of data collection involved the formulation of an interview guide (Kaufman, 1994; Minichiello et al., 1995; Grbich, 1999; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). This involved recasting the research themes into open-ended questions aimed at drawing out women’s life stories. The research themes of discourse, bodies, relationships and life changes were integrated into an historical framework in which I asked respondents to discuss each theme in relation to different stages of their life.

As data collection progressed the interview guide was revised to reflect the analytical findings from previous interviews. Some questions proved to be confusing for participants and were removed or re-worded. In later interviews, questions were added about emerging themes. For instance, the importance of the quality of relationship women had with their male partners emerged as a strong theme so the interview guide was reorganised so that research topics were discussed in the context of key relationships and not framed in chronological life stages. By the last
interview I had produced seven versions of the interview guide. The final version can be found in Appendix A.

The interviews took place on the university campus in a quiet, private office. The duration of the interviews ranged from 75 minutes (Judith) to 150 minutes (Elizabeth). They began with general topics such as current life circumstances, family background and childhood events. These topics were neutral and, for the most part, non-threatening, allowing respondents to become comfortable with the interview situation and me. Following Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander (1993: 61), I endeavoured to make the interview a “conversation with a purpose” rather than a question and answer session. I hoped this might alleviate some of the researcher-researched or subject-object division that has traditionally been a part of social science research (Olesen, 1994: 163).

**Interview tools**

The main interview tool employed was *funnelling*. General or broad questions were asked initially followed by more specific questions guiding the respondent towards issues of particular interest (Minichiello et al., 1993: 84). For instance, asking respondents to describe their family background and childhood experiences elicited a broad variety of responses. From this I engaged respondents in more specific conversations about the defining aspects of their childhood. Sue spoke at length about the conditions of poverty, overcrowding and hardship she experienced in a working class family and Deidre stressed the experience
of growing up in a country town and her desire to escape to a more exciting and sophisticated life.

An interview tool that proved extremely useful was not one that I initially intended to use but, rather, emerged from the data collection-analysis interplay. Data revealed that, in talking about sex, women invariably turned their narratives towards the quality of the relationships they had with their male partners. By organising interview questions in relation to partners or key players, I was able to gain information about how the experience of sex shifted from partner to partner, through varying “kinds” of relationships. I further developed this strategy by asking respondents to identify the most significant sexual partners in their lives. The task of identifying key relationships, in itself, evoked talk about why these relationships were important and stories about how the relationships began, developed and ended.

**Interviewing women**

Ann Oakley (1981: 30) and other feminist researchers suggest that women’s meanings and talk are often obfuscated by masculinist culture and language. This was strikingly clear during my interviews where it became evident that women had very little “friendly” language with which to communicate their sexual experiences. While the men of Gary Dowsett’s (1996) study freely described their sex practices using terms like “fuck” or “wank” (p. 145), the women in this study were considerably more reserved. The comfort with which Dowsett’s (1996) respondents described
their bodies – “dick”, “cock” or “lunch” (p. 144) - displays a certain carefree understanding about their bodies and sexuality that was not apparent in women’s language. Many respondents struggled to articulate the events of their sexual experiences, using vague or meaning-neutral language: phrases such as “sleep with”, “make love”, “masturbate” and “orgasm” were common in respondents stories. In a number of instances, respondents skipped over the practical details of their sexual encounters, summing up the sequence of events in statements such as “playing around” or “one thing lead to another”. Here, the cultural conventions that ascribe sexual reserve to women emerged clearly in the language used during interviews.

Reflexivity – the co-creation of meaning in the interview situation

Kaufman (1994) suggests that both the researcher and the respondent bring personal understandings to the interview through which the meanings of the talk are shaped:

Data are not simply collected. Rather, they are created only through the collaboration between researcher and informant. Data emerge in the process of dialogue, negotiation and understanding. Both coproducers will come to that dialogue with attitudes, values, personal agendas, and conceptual frameworks that find their way into the content of the interview as it unfolds over time (p. 128).

Thus, my capacity to reflect upon my own role in the creation of the data was essential throughout the research process. During data collection I did this by making notes about my own feelings about the interview, the rapport I established with each interviewee and the pre-conceptions and motivations of the respondents.
I felt that one of the main features to shape the interviews was my own acceptance of women’s sexual stories. I suspected that my failure to be shocked by respondents’ stories encouraged them to tell me their stories in a certain way. Moreover, my position as a feminist researcher influenced the way some informants communicated their stories. In particular, I sensed that respondents who identified as feminist censored stories about themselves acting in less than “empowered” ways.

The rapport established with respondents also influenced the meaning-making process. For instance, Denise came to the interview seeking reassurance that her sexual experiences were “normal”. To her, I represented expertise or academic authority, reflecting what Dowsett (1996: 285) calls a “moment in hegemony” which shaped the research interview and the meaning-creation project.

The informants themselves, as independent subjective beings, also brought their own pre-conceptions and motivations to the interview. As a part of my efforts to maintain reflexivity, I asked each respondent about her motivations for participating. Most took part for the altruistic reasons of helping me or the possibility of helping women in general. Some wanted to defy society’s injunctions against talking freely about sex and so came to the interview seeking an opportunity to “vent” or speak in detail about their experiences.
Ethical considerations

Protecting the safety and well-being of respondents was exceptionally important for this study because of the highly personal nature of the research topic. Ethical approval was gained from the Sydney University Human Ethics Committee and each participant read and signed an information sheet and consent form prior to the interview (Appendix B). However, above and beyond this, I assured each respondent that she was able to withdraw her consent at any time, even after the interview was completed. I guaranteed respondents that they were not required to talk about anything they deemed too personal or hurtful. Moreover, at the interview meeting, I reminded each woman that they could switch off the tape recorder at any time. One informant took up this offer to tell me a story that she wished to be “off the record”. Only myself and my research supervisor had access to the interview tapes and transcripts, which were stored in a locked file cabinet and on a password protected computer. All identifying information was altered, including names, occupations and places.

Sampling procedures

Sampling commenced with two pilot interviews. These were useful for establishing foundation themes and, more importantly, to provide me, a novice qualitative researcher, with an opportunity to learn interview and analysis skills. Neither of the pilot interviews was included in the main data of this study and excerpts of these interviews do not appear in this thesis.
The data on which this thesis is based came from eighteen Australian women who identified as having had previous sexual experience with men. They ranged in age from nineteen to 79 years. Participants were recruited from several avenues: four responded to posters placed around the university campus; three to posters placed at a local women’s community group office; seven to an advertisement in a local newspaper; and four were referred by other informants, friends or colleagues. Sampling concluded after the eighteenth respondent because “saturation” was achieved. More detailed information about the women in the study sample can be found in the capsule biographies in the final section of this chapter.

**Data analysis: “The art of interpretation”**

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) point out that “individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions, all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why” (p. 12). Thus, it is the role of the researcher to make sense of the meaning in people’s stories and it is this that is the intellectual work of research. The following section details the logic behind the choice of narrative analysis, the systematic procedures used to identify narratives and glean meaning from them, and the interpretive process undertaken to collate, compare, reorganise and present the final collective themes.
Why narrative analysis?

The choice of narrative analysis emerges from the life history data collection method and grounded theory/progressive-regressive methodology. Data collected from such a design are not only replete with stories about significant life events, but they also contain information about how the narrator sees him or herself in relation to such events. That is, respondents engaged in what Russell (2001) calls “identity talk” where they spoke about how they saw themselves as sexual beings. Nouri and Helterline (1998) provide further understanding:

Narratives give meaning, connectedness, and directionality to a series of otherwise isolated events. The construction and reconstruction of meaning in relation to events in social life involves the fictionalization of the concrete, present, and phenomenal in order to make sense of one’s life, to enable intentionalness, and to experience value, to name a few important components of personhood (p. 38).

Through narrative, the respondents in this study sought to communicate how they viewed their situation in the social world and their identity. Thus analysis of these narratives permitted me to explore not only life events and experiences but the way that subjectivity shifted in relation to such events.

Identifying and interpreting narratives

The first step in the analytic procedure was to turn the audio-taped talk into written text. Riessman (1993: 56) argues that transcription, in itself, is an interpretive and analytic practice because it is during transcription that decisions are made about which linguistic elements to include or exclude and whether to display parts or all of what is said. So, prior to transcribing
the first tape, I devised standards around which I would produce all transcripts. First, I decided all talk would be transcribed, my own and the respondents, as well as any disruptions that occurred during the interview. Non-linguistic elements such as laughs, pauses, and intonations were turned into markers within the transcript text. Each turn of conversation between the informant and myself was represented by a new line in the transcript.

**What did I determine to be a narrative?**

I used guidelines set out by Labov (1972, 1982), Riessman (1993) and Coffey and Atkinson (1996) to determine and identify narrative forms within the transcripts. Labov (1972, 1982) was instrumental in developing the narrative analysis approach by identifying the way that people tell stories using *simple narratives*. With a simple narrative, the teller organizes a personal experience into a story containing distinct structures and following a particular sequence. Labov asserts that it is in teasing apart this structure that the meaning or significance of people’s stories can be gleaned.

Riessman (1993) uses Labov’s simple narrative approach to identify and describe the variety of ways that people tell stories. She describes *habitual narratives* – where respondents described their general experiences, referring to events that have happened repeatedly rather than the single event; or *hypothetical narratives* – where respondents speculate on events that have not happened (Riessman, 1993: 18).
Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) contrastive rhetoric was another narrative form used in data analysis, which refers to narratives “in which the speaker and his or her practices or values are legitimated or justified by means of comparisons with what goes on elsewhere, what has been done in the past, or what others do” (p. 104). Respondents used contrastive rhetoric to compare their own identity with that of others, as demonstrated by Nicole:

Nicole: I was certainly the more outgoing between me and my sister, which I think you often find with two sisters. The older one is normally the more delicate, uh, you know more fragile, more beauty oriented and the second one is normally a tomboy, probably because the parents are a little bit more relaxed with the second child. But, um, my sister is a Barbie doll. She hates it when I call her that but she is. And um she’s, she’s had a lot of problems and hasn’t really found her feet enough.

By using her sister as a comparison, Nicole constructs herself as independent, resilient and unconcerned with the frivolities of beauty. Through her talk, Nicole disassociates herself with the “feminine fragility” she ascribes to her sister.

The final narrative form used in data analysis was that associated with the structuring or organisation of respondents’ talk, what Riessman (1993) describes as “narrative form and function” (p. 38). Riessman (1993) describes this task as going “beyond the core narrative” and the evaluation of life events to the meaning embedded in the way stories are told, “with asides that modify, by repeating words or phrases, by expressive sounds and silences” (p. 38). Here, a researcher gleans meaning from long
pauses, the structure of sentences, the narrator’s choice of emphasis or vocabulary, the sequence of story action and how one story might build on another. The importance of looking at this deeper level of meaning is demonstrated in Diane’s narrative about her attraction to Ian:

JB: So tell me how your relationship with him came about. 
Dianne: I worked with him. 
Um, he’s an extremely [emphasis] attractive man in anyone’s eyes. He’s extremely um, [p] um very well groomed, extremely well-groomed, a very intelligent man, a very patient man, a very giving man to other people of his, in terms of his time. Um, he has a degree in Chemistry. He was the vice director of the business where I worked and so that’s how I met him.

Separating the segments of Diane’s narrative highlights the way that her speech takes on a poetic structure. By using parallel sentence structure – “a very intelligent man, a very patient man, a very giving man” – in combination with the repetitive use of words – “extremely”, “well-groomed”, “very” - Diane communicates the intensity of emotion she felt for Ian. Riessman (1993: 51-52) argues that this level of analysis can permit the most intimate insight into the subjective realm. In sum, the act of storytelling takes multiple forms. The different genres of narrative “persuade differently” (Riessman, 1993: 18) and offer numerous levels of meaning through content of talk, the composition of words, and the ways stories are linked.

Note that the singular and plural versions of the word “narrative” are used with particular intention in the following chapters of this thesis. The
singular is used when discussing a particular simple, habitual, hypothetical or contrastive narrative. The plural is used when the discussion refers to general or overall meanings gleaned from the respondent’s life history, as it is constituted by the numerous narrative forms outlined here.

**How did I interpret and synthesize narrative meanings?**

While a grounded theory methodology is inductive and open-ended, it nevertheless requires that data be subjected to systematic analytical procedure. Thus, while the research findings of this study were emergent, the methods through which these findings arose was rigorous and each transcript was subjected to consistent analytical process. This ensured that newly emerging themes were afforded the same weight as others.

All transcripts were carefully read, narrative structures were identified and preliminary themes were noted in the transcript margins. The transcript was then put aside and re-read several days later. New notes were made and themes were clarified, linked and integrated. Following this, a *case study* of 4000–7000 words was written where discrete narratives were synthesized to identify an overarching story line (following Connell, 1995; Connell, 1991; Dowsett, 1996; Denzin, 1989; Russell, 2001). Disconnected stories were organised in a chronological framework or an “historical timeline” (Plummer, 2001: 128). This chronological ordering allowed me to situate each respondent within her specific generational and cultural history. It also illuminated the structural factors shaping each woman’s life experiences, such as Katy’s childhood experiences as an
immigrant, or Judith’s Catholic working class background. In short, the case study allowed exploration of the sexual life trajectories of each woman in relation to her social location.

Once the case study was complete an analytic abstract (following Denzin, 1989) of 4000-7000 words was written for each respondent. The analytic abstract discussed each of the research themes in relation to the respondent's life story. On occasion, a respondent’s story was compared to a previous case if there appeared to be a significant similarity or difference. For instance, Johanna’s analytic abstract includes a discussion about Clare who is of similar age, education and background, yet has had a remarkably different sexual life history. This permitted me to explore the precedents of such different sexual life trajectories.

Collective analyses were written several times during data collection. One after the first five interviews, two more after ten interviews and another after all eighteen interviews were completed. The collective analyses were 5000–10,000 words and endeavored to compare and contrast overarching storylines, summarise discursive themes, and engage with the literature.

Representing life stories: whose story is it?

The final step in the research process involved the compilation of the research findings into the data presentation that comprises the remaining chapters of this thesis. Like every other stage of reflexive research, representing data is problematic. This is especially true for life history
research where raw data are hidden from the reader’s view as they are processed into stories (Riessman, 1993: 32). There is some tension in this, of course, in relation to the feminist objective to represent women’s intimate experiences of sex, as they themselves understand them. Thus, in order to present the data as accurately as possible, I engaged in a highly reflexive process of deciding how respondent’s talk was ordered, which talk was included and how it was contextualised. I endeavored to consistently ask myself whether I was accurately and truthfully representing the respondent. I tried to let the data speak for itself by including long, unedited excerpts of respondents talk. In this way, while some of the interview quotes in the following chapters may be ambiguous or convoluted, they are, importantly, representing the speaker.

Introduction to study participants – 18 capsule biographies

The objective of accurately representing respondents’ experiences meant that the data presentation required lengthy descriptions of their life stories. Accordingly, for purposes of brevity, I was forced to select a sub sample for presentation in the following chapters. Chapters Five through Nine present the life stories of seven participants who were chosen because their stories most lucidly described the collective research findings. Thus, although each of the eighteen participants’ life histories constituted the database and analysis of this study, only seven are presented here.
In order to acknowledge the effort undertaken by each woman in telling her most intimate and personal story, and to introduce the reader to the study respondents, I provide a brief introduction to each. The biographies are arranged by age, starting with Deidre who was 79 at the time of interview and finishing with Katy who was nineteen.

Deidre, 79, was born and raised in the country but has lived in Sydney for many years. Growing up, Deidre was attracted to the sophistication and excitement of “bigger and better” things. She married in her early twenties, had two children, but divorced after 25 years of unhappy marriage and has since lived alone. Deidre dislikes her generation’s attitude towards sex and feels regretful about having missed the sexual freedom that is available to women today.

Elizabeth, 74, had a long and successful professional career. She was married for 25 years before becoming widowed in her late forties. Sex with her husband was a difficult and frustrating experience. It was not until he died that her sex life became enjoyable. She spoke fondly of one relationship in particular which was not emotionally or romantically involved but was immensely pleasurable and adventurous.

Elena, 63, is retired and lives alone, enjoying an active social life. After losing her husband in a car accident when she was only 33, Elena experienced a number of sexual relationships. She discloses a mindful, purposive and self-reflexive approach to sex and is highly capable of ensuring that her needs for pleasure and safety are met.

Judith is 54 and married with two grown children. Growing up in a Catholic family, Judith experienced sex as something to be feared. Her husband of 30 years has been her only sexual partner. She is decidedly unhappy in her marriage, feeling that her husband shows little love or respect for her.

Sue is 54 with a successful professional career. Growing up in the country in a poor working class family was highly formative of her early sexual experiences. For Sue, sex and pregnancy posed a significant threat to her aspirations to go to university and to escape her working class life. Sue’s twenties were spent in Sydney where
she was immersed in the sexually liberal culture of the 1970s women’s liberation movement.

Diane is 45 and lives alone in her home in Sydney’s west. With no tertiary education, Diane worked hard to establish a successful career in administration. She has had a number of sexual relationships in her life, including a short marriage in her early twenties. She speaks most fondly of one man, Ian, who was married and with whom she had a long and loving relationship.

Kathleen is 43 and married with two children. In her twenties, she enjoyed a long and sometimes confusing period of sexual experimentation. Since marrying at 25, sex has been difficult because of what she sees to be her husband’s lack of sexual aptitude. Kathleen has had several sexual affairs during her eighteen years of marriage, which she attributes to her need to experience the “feeling of good sex”.

Caroline is 41 and a recovering drug addict. She had a damaging childhood, experiencing severe physical and sexual abuse. She talks about sex in a disassociated and often contradictory manner, describing how sexual acts have very little personal meaning to her, yet, at the same time, referring to her desire for emotional intimacy.

Deb is 38, well-educated, with a young family. Coming from a middle class, liberally-minded background, Deb has a free and comfortable attitude towards sex. She speaks about her sexual experiences with both passion and confidence. While often using sex as a means to “catch” men when younger, Deb later learned to enjoy the sensual and erotic aspects of sex.

Teresa is a 37 year old professional educator. She lives with her partner of three years in Sydney’s west. Growing up in a traditionally-minded Greek immigrant family powerfully shaped Teresa’s ideas about sex. While she now enjoys a pleasurable and exciting sex life with her partner, she often struggles with feelings of guilt and apprehension.

Denise, 36, is a primary school teacher in Sydney’s west. She has had several relationships with men but considers only two of these significant. Most of Denise’s talk about sex was situated in terms of relationships, commitment, love and trust, referring little to the physical sensations of sex.
Lisa, 32, grew up in western Sydney, as the eldest daughter in a working class family. Like many working class girls, Lisa married young. The marriage ended after seven years, signifying a turning point in her life where a range of new possibilities became evident to her, including the potentialities of sex. She has an enthusiastic, intelligent and open-minded attitude towards sex.

Johanna, a 27 year old university student, lives with her partner of two years. She feels she has a naturally low sex drive, an aspect of herself that she dislikes and is trying to change. Johanna views sex as a healthy activity, important to one’s well-being and central to forming healthy relationships.

Clare is 28 and works for a non-profit organisation. Growing up in the country in a conservative family, Clare was captivated by the progressive social ideas she encountered at university. She has had a colourful sex life, experimenting with role play, leather, bondage and discipline and group sex. While Clare has had a number of sexual relationships with men, she now has relationships exclusively with women. This emerged from a series of difficult and unpleasant sexual experiences and, what Clare sees to be, the genital-focused or orgasm-focused nature of heterosex.

Nicole is a 26 year old financial advisor. She is recently divorced from a very short and, what she now sees to be, ill-considered marriage. For Nicole, sex is seen as a means to gain equality with men. She enjoys casual sex because she feels she gains empowerment through it, but at the same time feels guilt and self-loathing after casual encounters. Nicole is deeply conflicted about her sexual experiences.

Tracey is a 23 year old university student. Her first experience with penetrative sex was at the age of nineteen with a married co-worker. Tracey carried a great sense of disappointment over this experience, questioning her identity as a moral and decent woman. The sexual encounters that followed this first experience were largely shaped by her belief that she was no longer a “good” and moral woman.

Nadine is 21 and also a university student. She is highly reflective about her sexual experiences, developing an open-minded and confident attitude towards sex. Nadine’s capacity for reflection makes her capable of ensuring that her needs for sexual pleasure and safety are met.
Katy, at 19, is the youngest woman in the study. She spends her time attending university, working and spending time with her boyfriend. As a child, Katy immigrated to Australia from Taiwan with her family. She dislikes the taboo status sex is accorded in Chinese culture. Her sexual experiences have been shaped by her efforts to disassociate herself from the prudish image of feminine sexuality that predominates in Chinese culture.
Chapter Five

Making sense of sex: discourses of respectability, equality and biology

This chapter explores the first of the study’s three research themes: the discourses or symbolic representations through which women make sense of their sexual experiences.

The women who participated in this study understood their sexual experiences mainly through two symbolic representations: the passive, “proper” and sexually obliging girlfriend or wife, and the active and “sexually equal” woman. The “proper” or respectable woman emerged in a correspondent relationship to what one respondent described as the "bloody prostitute". Such a coupled representation positioned feminine sexuality dichotomously as either passively asexual, responsive to masculine desire and “good”, or actively sexual, immoral and “bad”. The “sexually equal” woman was associated with ideas of sex as an arena in which women are autonomous and consenting individuals who have the same rights as men to practise sex.
Both of these representations are underpinned by the medico-scientific construct of sex as a natural phenomenon driven by biological or evolutionary imperatives. The chapter begins by exploring how this medico-scientific construction is demonstrated in women’s talk. The second and third parts of the chapter go on to demonstrate how the representations of the “proper girlfriend” and the “sexually equal” woman are constituted through women’s narratives and how medico-scientific notions underpin both.

The medico-scientific discourse

The view that sexuality derives from biological sources was expressed by a number of respondents who used it to give meaning to both their own sexual experiences and those of their male partners. Through this discourse women constructed sexuality as the personal expression of biologically based attributes.

The medico-scientific discourse was articulated in two main ways by the respondents. The first involved talk that made a direct link between human sexuality and the evolutionary and “animalistic” drive to reproduce. Male and female sexuality were considered complementary opposites: masculine sexuality is uncontrollable and predatory, and feminine sexuality is passive and responsive. The second was through talk that articulated a construction of sexuality reminiscent of psychological, medical and sexological discourse. Such talk located sexuality as a naturally unfolding phenomenon that is a part of normal human
development. Here, masculine and feminine sexuality were constructed as identical and equal.

**Theme One: “Just like in the animal kingdom” - male and female complementary opposites**

The view that human sexuality mirrors the reproductive behaviours of animals was expressed by a number of respondents. The notion of natural sexual instinct was used to give meaning to respondents’ own sexual practices and those of their male partners, as demonstrated by Denise:

Denise: I just don’t believe humans are supposed to be monogamous… serial monogamy is what I believe in. I think you should be with one person at one time. But that doesn’t mean that one person is going to last you your whole lifetime. Yeah, generally speaking the animal world isn’t monogamous in relationships and I don’t think humans really are designed to be that way long term.

Here, Denise constructs humans as naturally promiscuous. She views humans as being the same as “other animals” whom she believes are generally not monogamous. Such a view gives meaning to her sexual experiences with married men. For her, men and women are “designed” to mate with many partners, so the monogamy expected by marriage is not always achievable.

While Denise sees men’s and women’s sexuality as identical – in that both men and women are “naturally” sexually promiscuous - other women report that they believe male and female sexuality is different. In the following narrative, Nicole describes what she considers the “natural” composition of feminine sexuality:
Nicole: I honestly believe a woman should be feminine, shave their legs, do their make up, whatever... just like in the animal kingdom with birds, you have their colouring and everything to attract mates, that’s what we do so [shrug].

In Nicole’s view, femininity and its associated practices – shaving legs or wearing make up – derive from an inherent drive to attract a suitable mate. Thus, for her, feminine sexuality is “made” to attract male attention. In this way, feminine sexuality is intrinsically different from male sexuality. Women’s sexuality is designed to passively attract and men’s sexuality is designed to actively respond. Nicole’s construction of men as actively sexual is represented in the following narrative:

Nicole: They become like animals and they just can’t control themselves. And sometimes they get a bit panicky and they don’t even know what to do. And they’re just [gasp] and they can’t breathe properly. And they do this [two short gasps] thing which drives me insane. So, if you take control of the situation then they sort of calm down and get into a better groove whereas [otherwise] they’d probably just go at it like dogs.

Here, Nicole compares men’s sexuality to that of animals. She reports that men’s sexual passion becomes so overwhelming that they cannot breathe properly. To Nicole, women must “take control” of wild and unruly male sexuality and manage the sexual encounter in order to prevent masculine urges getting out of hand.

Other respondents also viewed masculine sexuality as uncontrollable and predatory. This is evident in Johanna’s hypothetical narrative about why she avoids casual sex:
Johanna: I could never do that [casual sex] because I’d be afraid that I’d either get hurt or somebody takes advantage of me or [p]

JB So they would take advantage of you in what kind of way?

Johanna: I don’t know [p] that they would do things to me that I wouldn’t agree to. You know, even though you, you can say no, or, you know they would just push it too far. And um [p] yeah I don’t know, I just don’t want to get into that situation where you have to defend yourself, so I only get intimate with people I trust and really like.

For Johanna, casual sex should be avoided precisely because of the potentially coercive and uncontrollable nature of male sexuality. When it comes to men, there is always the possibility that they will push things too far.

Deidre also referred to the predatory nature of male sexuality in her comments about “modern” attitudes to sex:

Deidre: It’s sad really and young girls having sex at a very early age, that’s terrible, being prey to men who are still out there. But that’ll always be.

Here, Deidre not only describes male sexuality as predatory but also inevitable. For her, men will always be predators and women will always be prey.

By linking human sexuality to animal reproduction, the preceding narratives construct sex as inescapably biological. Both male and female sexuality are viewed as reproductively driven. Men’s sexuality is active, unruly, predatory and potentially dangerous. Women’s, on the other hand,
is passive and focussed first on attracting male attention and then, as Nicole suggests, on managing men's unruly compulsions. Sexuality is thus constructed on the basis of sexual difference: male and female sexuality are understood as complementary opposites.

Importantly, however, the sexual difference evident in these accounts is not neutral. Male and female sexuality do not exist as equally paired opposites. Rather, male sexuality is the defining principle for determining the nature of human sexuality. Female sexuality exists only in the presence of an active and pursuing masculine sexuality. In borrowing from de Beauvoir (1972), Hollway (1984: 229) refers to this as the principle of “otherness”: to be feminine is to not be masculine. Here, this means that feminine sexuality is defined only in terms of its difference from masculine sexuality. Thus, because men are sexually wild and unruly, women, in being the “other”, are sexually docile and subservient.

This account of opposite but complementary sexuality underpins the construction of the “proper girlfriend” in which feminine sexuality is located as responsive and passive. Here, women who display passive sexuality are positioned as respectable and “proper”, and women who display active sexuality are seen as dangerous and “bad”. This discussion will be elaborated further in the second part of the chapter in relation to the “proper” girlfriend discourse. However, the chapter now addresses the alternative representation of natural sexuality in which masculine and feminine sexuality are viewed as identical.
Theme two: “I felt that maybe I was not normal” - identical sexuality

A number of women made reference to what they called “normal” sexuality. They gave meaning to their sexual experiences by comparing them with what they viewed to be normal human sexual development. The notion that a normal sexuality exists reflects predominant sexological and medical discourse in which sex is thought to be an expression of an inner human constitution that unfolds along a normative developmental pathway through the life span. As the women in this study suggest, anything outside of this normative pathway is seen as deviant or pathological.

Age at first intercourse emerged as one of the sexual norms against which women compared their own experiences. For instance, at the age of twenty, Denise felt that she was too old to be a virgin:

Denise: Um I started very late. Um, I didn’t have sex until I was twenty.

Denise: As I got older in my teenage years I was also getting to be embarrassed by the fact that I was eighteen or nineteen or twenty and still a virgin. Um, so that was my biggest fear at that time.

Denise was embarrassed by her virginity, which, to her, was an abnormal predicament for a twenty year old woman. Embedded in Denise’s statements is the idea that there is an appropriate age at which girls first engage in sex, an idea that is also reflected in Nicole’s narrative:

Nicole: Um [p] I probably started a bit young with boys and [my mum] kind of put up with that I guess.

JB Why do you say that?
In contrast to Denise’s anxiety about being a virgin at twenty, Nicole feels uncertain about *not* being a virgin at seventeen. Like Denise, she compares her experience with some unspecified standard and, in her view, she was too young to have sex. Nicole’s and Denise’s narratives illustrate the way that sexuality is constructed using the dualistic framework of normal and abnormal. To them, there is an acceptable or “normal” age at which girls engage in sex. Both women feel that, because their experiences fall outside this supposed normative standard, they are abnormal.

Interestingly, Nicole’s and Denise’s narratives also demonstrate the way that sexual norms are ambiguous and contradictory. Nicole feels too young to lose her virginity at seventeen. Denise feels too old at twenty. So, what then is the appropriate or normal age at which a girl can engage in sex? Despite women feeling that such normative standards are central in defining and giving meaning to their sexual experiences, it seems that the exact nature of these standards is ambiguous.

Women used the idea of “normal sexuality” to give meaning to other aspects of their sexual experiences. For example, Denise identifies “faking orgasms” as a normal sex practice:

*JB when did you start doing that?*
Denise: Oh right from the word go.

JB Oh right.

Denise: Cause you read in books that, you know, when you’re supposed to pant and make noises and have an orgasm. And, so you pretend if it’s not happening.

As Denise points out, she pants and groans during sex because, in her view, this is what one is supposed to do. As she also suggests in her reference to “books”, the construct of female orgasm as “panting and groaning” comes from popular social understandings of what sex entails. This can also be seen in Johanna’s narrative and her reference to magazines and television:

Johanna: Um, I’m still quite reluctant to try new things, which I find a bit disturbing so I’m trying to get over that [chuckle]. I bought like a couple of books and I thought maybe I’ll just read. And actually that was really good because I felt that, um, I was maybe not normal because I had the feeling, well I guess everything you read in magazines and you see on television and you go like “gee, all these women want to have sex all the time”… and even though, you know, that not everybody is like that you still, when you feel a bit insecure anyway you start to think “oh, you know, maybe it is me”.

To Johanna, “normal” sexuality involves being sexually adventurous and eager to try new things. She sees her own lack of interest in sexual adventure as “disturbing” and “not normal”. Like Denise and Nicole, Johanna views sex as practice which involves certain normative standards: for her, if a woman is to be sexually “normal”, she must display an interest in sexual adventure.
As the preceding narratives demonstrate, respondents constructed an account of sexuality as a phenomenon that develops according to certain normative standards – for instance, first intercourse between seventeen and twenty years of age. Further, sex involves certain normative practices such as noisy orgasms or sexual experimentation. This reflects the construction of sexuality seen in sexological discourse: that sex is a physical expression of internal, pregiven personal attributes. In this way, sex is viewed as a physical experience with little social, emotional or relational content.

Such a view is built on the dualistic thinking inherent in scientific and medical discourse. While the “complementary opposites” account of natural sexuality upholds a dualism of masculine active and feminine passive, here sexuality is constructed in terms of normal and abnormal. Sexuality is “established and explained as pairs of mutually exclusive opposites” (Sheridan, 1998: 289). Sexologists such as Ellis (1936) used such dualistic thinking to define certain sex practice as normal and others as pathological or perverted. This kind of characterisation is evident in Johanna’s narrative about her lack of sexual adventure. Descriptions such as “disturbing” and “not normal” reflect her construction of sex as either normal and thereby good, or abnormal and thereby pathological. For her, a lack of sexual adventure is deviant, requiring that action be taken to address the problem.
While the current account of natural sexuality sustains medico-scientific dualisms, it relinquishes the moralistic dualism present in “complementary” sexuality, instead claiming scientific objectivity. Sexologists such as Kinsey (1953) strived to use the “honesty of science” to encourage wider social acceptance of so-called sexual perversity. For Kinsey (1953) and other sexologists, human sexuality existed outside of social morality. For them, because sexuality is natural, it is thereby good and respectable.

The key feature that distinguishes this sexological construction of sexuality from the “complementary opposites” account is its apparent gender neutrality. Here, masculine and feminine sexuality are constructed as identical. Feminine sexuality is no longer viewed as passive or responsive to men’s desires. Rather, women are thought to have the same active and desiring sexuality as men. This gender neutrality is evident in both Johanna’s and Denise’s recognition of the existence of feminine sexual desire and pleasure. Both believe that women have a capacity to orgasm, pant, make noise, and just generally need sex often. Indeed, for them, these are the experiences of a normal, healthy sexual woman.

This sexual sameness is a central feature of sexological discourse and can be found in the work of Hite (1976) and Masters and Johnson (1963), both of whom formulate feminine sexuality in terms of its equivalence with masculine sexuality. For them, male orgasm is indistinguishable from female orgasm; women’s desire is, like men’s, aggressive and predatory;
and the clitoris is equivalent to the penis. In short, men and women basically experience sex in the same way.

It is from these notions of sexual sameness that women such as Johanna and Denise generate their account of feminine sexuality. For them, if masculine sexuality is easily orgasmic and energetically desiring, then feminine sexuality must be the same. This gender neutrality, however, is male-centred. While feminine sexuality is constructed as desiring and pleasure-seeking, this is based on a model of active masculine sexuality. In other words, the assumptions of male sexuality are simply applied to women. This argument will be developed further in the last section of this chapter in relation to the discourse of masculine sexual citizenship which represents men’s and women’s sexuality as naturally equal.

Within medico-scientific discourse exist two distinctly different and contradictory accounts of feminine sexuality. One constructs women as asexual and responsive to masculine desire, and the other represents women’s sexuality as the same as active masculine sexuality. Both accounts are derived from the Cartesian idea that human sexuality is the expression of a unique character or interior essence. These medico-scientific constructions underpin the discourses of the “proper girlfriend” and the “sexually equal” woman. The gender-neutral account of natural sexuality informs the discourse of sexual citizenship by positioning masculine and feminine sexuality as identical. Accordingly, women are
entitled to the same access as men to sexual freedom and pleasure.

Similarly, the account of “complementary opposites” provides the basis for the “proper girlfriend” discourse that positions feminine sexuality as responsive to a loving, committed, male partner. It is to this "proper girlfriend" discourse that the chapter now turns.

The dichotomy of feminine sexuality: The “proper girlfriend” and the “bloody prostitute”

Several respondents expressed the belief that sex was an integral part of a loving relationship and gave meaning to their sexual experiences in these terms. Their narratives depicted women who have sex outside of committed relationships as “easy”, promiscuous and immoral. These respondents thus understood women’s sexuality in terms of two opposite and interdependent images: in the words of the respondents, these were the “proper girlfriend” and the “bloody prostitute”.

Three main themes emerged in the respondents’ narratives that most clearly expressed this dichotomy. These were that feminine sexuality: i) emerges in the course of a loving and committed relationship; ii) involves responsibility for men’s sexual gratification; and iii) eschews “deviant” sexual practices in the interest of managing the unruliness of masculine sexuality.
Theme One: “The One” - Sex and the heterosexual romantic dream

Denise: I just knew as soon as I laid eyes on [Bradley] that I liked him and he was the one for me.

Denise’s talk of “the one” and reference to the romantic notion of love at first site is suggestive of what Ussher (1997a: 445) calls the heterosexual romantic dream; that is, the myth that every woman has a predestined Mr. Right who will appear and happiness will ensue. Denise used this idea in discussing her sexual experiences with Bradley. For her, sex was an integral part of the loving, committed relationship she felt she had with him.

Denise’s construction of sex as an intrinsic part of a loving relationship was also evident in the following narrative:

JB what would you say are your attitudes or beliefs towards sex?

Denise: Um, [p] its very um, some of what I think and do is probably contradictory in that I’ve always thought, for instance, you know married relationship: if someone is unfaithful, it’s that person’s fault not the extra person who might be single. But having said that, if I was in a married relationship I would expect fidelity [laugh] and probably would want to tear the other person’s eyes out just the same. And I can see why people in relationships are reluctant to blame their spouse because they want to keep that person and it’s very hard to stay with someone who you might blame. Um, sexual beliefs in terms of relationships? I guess, uh, if I was in one I suppose I would like fidelity but I haven’t always behaved in a way that would be that.

Denise believes that sex is something that best occurs within a committed relationship. She recognises that this has not always been her experience but, nevertheless, believes in “faithfulness”. Further levels of meaning are
evident when comparing Denise’s talk of sexual values with that of Deb or Elena. While Deb and Elena spoke about rights, consent, pleasure and joy, Denise constructed a narrative about “relationships”, “marriage” and “fidelity”. Not only did she use these words repeatedly in her narrative but, indeed, at one point she rephrased my question to incorporate her understanding of what the question meant to her: she asked herself about “sexual beliefs in terms of relationships?” Here, then, the meaning of Denise’s narrative comes not only from the narrative content but also the way in which she structured her talk. For Denise, sex is bound with notions of commitment, love and relationships.

The heterosexual romantic dream was also evident in respondents’ talk about sexual pleasure. Basically, sexual pleasure was viewed as a product of the emotional attachment that comes with love and commitment:

Denise: To be honest, I found sex really unsatisfactory if you didn’t have some sort of emotional attachment to the person you were having it with.

Katy:

JB What is it that you find most pleasurable about sex?

Katy: Oh [p] I guess, um, pleasuring the person I’m with. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. Um, physical contact, maybe. Excitement. Um [p], I don’t know, just connecting with someone.

Here, sexual pleasure is directly linked to emotional attachment or, as Katy says, “connecting” to a partner. These narratives convey distinctly
different meanings from those that appeared in Elena’s narrative about
sexual pleasure:

JB What is that you find most pleasurable about sex, in general?

Elena: First, that sort of like sensation on your skin and how
everything sort of highlightens [sic]. And, of course, orgasm
is a great thing. You just lose yourself, you are somewhere
else. [laugh] Away!

Elena describes sexual pleasure in terms of intense bodily sensation and
transcendence. Denise and Katy, by contrast, talk about it as being
indivisibly associated with emotionally invested relationships.

Theme Two: “Surely a proper girlfriend would” - Sexual obligation
and sexual nurturing

A number of women understood their sexual relations with men as
ensuring that men’s sexual needs were met: if a woman loves her partner,
she should be prepared to please him. In their view, it was the
responsibility of a “good” woman to provide sexual pleasure to her man.

Tracey expressed such a view in discussing her first experience of fellatio:

JB: What made you want to do it, the one time that it happened?

Tracey: I suppose in some ways, I guess, [p] you know, it was worth
experiencing and just, yeah. It’s what girlfriends do
occasionally I think, it’s one of those things I’ve, it’s always
been one of those things I occasionally do. Surely a proper
girlfriend would, and then I hit myself for thinking like that
[laugh].

Although Tracey feels foolish for feeling obliged, she makes a clear link
between being a “proper girlfriend” and an obligation to perform fellatio. As
she understands it, her first experience with fellatio emerged, at least in part, from a concept about what women do for men in a committed relationships.

Denise also understood her sexual relations with men in terms of an obligation to please a man sexually:

Denise: I had the idea that if anyone liked you and wanted to sleep with you, well then you should do that. And that if you didn’t then it would drive them away… there was very much that idea that if you met someone and you liked them they’d expect you to go to bed with them.

Here, Denise describes how feminine sexual obligation is rooted in feelings of mutual attraction: if a man likes you or you like him, then sex is expected.

Judith also talked about feminine sexual obligation. Yet, unlike Denise, Judith did not attribute her feelings of obligation to emotional attachment but, rather, to her duty as a wife:

Judith: Probably quite a few times I’ve had sex with him [husband] when I didn’t really feel like it. Uh, that’s not to say that once it all started I didn’t enjoy it, but I probably wasn’t the one to initiate having sex. Most of the time it would be him. And, um, it was all, it sort of gets like it’s another job, another duty. And after all the things you’ve done all day and then you’ve got to get into bed and still perform and it’s just as I got older it’s become a real chore.

Judith: I would say that there’s never been a lot of passion in our sex life. Like for him it was something he needed and wanted and I was it. I was the wife so, you know, I was the one to produce it for him.
The construction of women as providers of male sexual pleasure was also evident in respondents’ stories about helping or nurturing men, as demonstrated in Caroline’s narrative:

Caroline: [John’s] marriage just broke up and he was really depressed. And I felt he really needed [p] he said “oh Caroline I just don’t know why I’m just so depressed”. And [I] said “you just need a bit of comfort, you just need a bit of love”. He said “yeah ok”. I said “come on, you come with me and I’ll give you, I’ll fix you up” [laugh]… I said “well meet me, come and meet me at [suburb] and we’ll just talk”. So we went to the park to talk and then I just gave him a head job [laugh]. And because he told me he hadn’t had sex like for so long, you know. And nothing was supposed to happen but I did it, I did it, you know. I initiated the whole, I, he was just sitting there really down and depressed and not knowing what, his kids didn’t love him anymore and so I just gave him a great head job and he said “oh I feel better now” [laugh].

In this narrative, Caroline describes John as emotionally needy. His marriage had ended, he was unsure that his family supported him and, in Caroline view, he was in need of comfort. By constructing John as needy and herself as nurturing, Caroline confers on this encounter meanings of affection and concern. She provided him with sexual gratification but did so because she cared for him. Here, then, she was not so much obliged to provide pleasure but instead wanted to nurture him. Nevertheless, such a construction sustains the image of the “proper” woman by constructing feminine sexuality as responsive to masculine needs.

A similar theme of feminine sexual nurturing is found in Denise’s narrative about a partner who felt insecure about his sexual aptitude:
Denise: We tried lots of different things to help with his [sexual] problem. We went and bought videos and bought toys and dragged the mattress out in front of the TV and had sex and all sorts of things that you might not have normally done.

Denise describes their sex practice as exploratory and adventurous, not the normal kind of sex that usually happened. Importantly, such experimentation was only legitimate because she was helping him. Like Caroline, Denise justifies her so-called abnormal sexual practices through a discourse that defines feminine sexuality as caring and supportive.

In these narratives, women gave meaning to their sexual experiences by defining their feminine sexuality as responsible for male sexual gratification. Whether women were obliged to provide sexual pleasure as a girlfriend or wife, or they provided sexual pleasure out of a wish to nurture men, they nevertheless construct their sexuality as responsive to men’s needs. Here, “proper” feminine sexuality is non-existent until it is brought into being by a masculine need for sexual pleasure.

**Theme Three: Good girls don’t - feminine policing of heterosex**

The third and final feature of “proper” feminine sexuality involves women as sexual police or managers, as demonstrated in Caroline’s story about her experiences with anal sex:

Caroline: I wasn’t too keen on anal sex and I said to him “I don’t think I would really like that”. I said “I don’t think it’s, anal sex is not normal sex”, to me it’s not. I mean the gays, it’s fine but to me I don’t think it’s right. No, not right. But I don’t think I would like it, and I didn’t. I said “no stop”...

JB did that ever come up in your previous sexual relationships?
Caroline: No. It came up after, it came up after.

JB And after that you’d say [p]?

Caroline: I’d said “no I don’t like it”, I’d just say “I don’t like it. I can’t do it”. Some blokes were a bit put out. And I’d say “well go to the bloody Greek prostitute down the road and you’ll get it. Pay 150 dollars!” [laugh].

Caroline believes that anal sex is wrong. For her, maintaining respectability meant that she had to repeatedly refuse offers for such “inappropriate practice”; that is, she played gatekeeper in the face of the irrepressible desires of men.

Importantly, Caroline’s narrative demonstrates her connection of anal sex with deviancy. To her, it is the practice of gay men or prostitutes and it is here that the dichotomous counterpart of the “proper” woman is evident. In Caroline’s view, respectable women refuse transgressive sex practice. Correspondingly, women who agree to such practices are deemed immoral and deviant: they are “bloody prostitutes”.

Interestingly, Caroline adds an ethnicised dimension to her construction of deviant feminine sexuality, drawing attention to the way that the “othering” of feminine sexuality engenders aspects of race. Skeggs (1997) identifies how respectable feminine sexuality necessitated the displacement of sexual deviance onto women of colour and working class women. Caroline’s narrative sheds light on the way that “proper” feminine sexuality is sustained not only through the pathologising of certain sex acts but,
importantly, because “Black and White working class women were defined and designated as unpure, dangerous and sexual” (Skeggs, 1997: 122).

The good/bad dichotomy: respectability and depravity

The three themes demonstrated in the preceding narratives construct feminine sexuality as innocent, non-desiring and responsive to a loving, committed, heterosexual relationship. From such a perspective, women do not actively seek sex. Rather, their sexuality emerges from the love and commitment inherent in the “heterosexual romantic dream”. Women engage in sex because they love their boyfriend or husband; because they want to nurture him; or because the duty of their committed relationship requires it. Alternatively, as Caroline’s narrative demonstrates, women whose sexual practices stray outside of such relationships are pathologised as “bloody prostitutes” or, as other respondents have commented, “easy” and “promiscuous”. Evident in all of these narratives is a dichotomised feminine sexuality. Women are either innocent, sexually accommodating and “proper”, or they are independent, actively desiring and immoral, like “bloody prostitutes”. In linking their sexual experiences with loving, committed relationships, and in disparaging women who practise sex with men outside of such relationships, respondents constructed themselves as respectable.

Such a dichotomy is evident in the findings of other researchers, as previously mentioned (Cowie and Lees, 1981; Hollway, 1984; Ussher, 1994; Summers, 1994). For example, Hollway’s (1984) “have/hold”
discourse reveals a construction of feminine sexuality as dichotomised and correspondingly valourised as “good” or “bad”. She argues that the key proposition of the “have/hold” discourse is the Christian principle that sex should take place within a lasting relationship (Hollway, 1984: 232). Thus, women are defined as one of “wife and mistress, virgin and whore, Mary and Eve” (Hollway, 1984: 232). She argues that the insistence of women’s asexuality in the “have/hold” discourse is predicated on the idea that women have an inherent, rabid sexuality (Hollway, 1984: 232) that is depraved, dangerous and in need of masculine control in order to protect social morality. Ussher’s (1994) research also reveals a dichotomous framework – what she terms the Madonna/whore discourse (p. 165). She also notes how women shape their sexual practices and control their desire in order to meet the expectations of being a respectable woman.

**Complementary opposites: natural sexuality**

As Hollway (1984) suggests, the dichotomy of the “proper girlfriend” and the ”bloody prostitute” is informed by an understanding of sexuality as natural and biologically-derived. It is precisely because feminine sexuality is believed to be naturally passive that women who display active sexuality are deemed deviant. Furthermore, the view that masculine and feminine sexuality are natural “complementary opposites” sustains the assertion that “proper” feminine sexuality becomes desiring only in the presence of active and irrepressible masculine desire: women’s desire is brought into being through the love and commitment of a man.
Hollway (1984) argues that the discourse of “proper” feminine sexuality is not a complete mirror image of the discourse of natural “complementary opposites”. She claims that feminine sexuality is absent in discourses of natural sexuality: it exists only as the “Other” of the male sex drive. That is, feminine sexuality is non-existent except as the object of masculine desire. The “proper girlfriend” discourse, however, does positively define feminine sexuality, albeit as passive, undesiring and responsive. Hollway (1984: 232) goes on to argue that, in this construction, women have power that is not evident in the male sex drive discourse: it is the power attached to being attractive to men.

**Sustaining institutionalised heterosexuality**

As Rich (1980) argues, passive feminine sexuality and its active masculine counterpart are the central features of compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance. Importantly, women’s place as “proper” and valuable within the system of institutionalised heterosexuality is precarious and, as Caroline’s narrative attest, women are under constant threat of becoming the deviant “bloody prostitute”. Here, male control of female sexuality is sustained through the fear generated by the dichotomy of the respectable woman versus the immoral whore.

Certainly, radical feminist notions of compulsory heterosexuality are evident in the discourses women use to give meaning to their sex experience. But, the discourse of “proper” feminine sexuality is not the only construct through which women give meaning to their sexual
experiences. For instance, Elena’s narrative of sexual pleasure, joy and transcendence demonstrated little evidence of an association between sex and omnipotent masculine power. Elena’s narratives instead allude to a discourse in which women’s sexuality is viewed as the same as men’s, what I have termed the discourse of masculine sexual citizenship.

The discourse of the masculine sexual citizen: sexual equality on male-centred terms

Every respondent, in one form or another, repudiated the idea that she was a sexual victim. Instead, respondents considered themselves entitled to sexual pleasure and freedom much in the way that men traditionally have done. Most respondents expressed such entitlement in terms of being “equal to men” and independent “citizens” within the social world. In claiming citizenship, women saw themselves as having sexual rights and sexual responsibilities.

Importantly, as will be demonstrated, the kind of sexual citizenship articulated in women’s talk is formulated in terms of a male-centred model of sexuality. Respondents’ narratives demonstrate that they see this male-centred discourse as the only means through which they can claim active sexuality. Yet such a representation departs considerably from the concept of sexual citizenship developed in the scholarly literature (Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 1998; Connell, 1995; Ryan, 2000; Richardson, 2000) which links sexual citizenship with the “democratisation of relationships” (Weeks, 1998: 40) involving mutuality, disclosure,
negotiation and respect. This section will conclude with a brief analysis of the shortcomings of the concept of sexual citizenship as it is represented in respondents’ talk.

Theme One: “Anything between consenting adults” and “the one doing the fucking” - constructing and claiming citizenship

Some respondents’ narratives represented all individuals as having the same need for sexual gratification and the same right to express such needs, as evident in Kathleen’s and Elizabeth’s references to individual choice, tolerance and consent:

JB What are your beliefs of values when it comes to sex?

Kathleen: [p] anything between consenting adults. Try to inflict as little pain as possible, basically [laugh].

JB So, basically a free attitude: people can do what they want to do?

Kathleen: Yeah, just try not to scare the horses as my mother used to say [laugh]. Yeah, I just, there are things that I don’t want to do and there are things that I don’t want to watch. There are things that I do want to do and I do want to watch. But, um, [p] if you’re an adult and the balance of power isn’t unbalanced then [shrug].

Elizabeth: Ah, well I suppose I probably would be taken to have very free and easy attitudes about sex, um compared with most women of my age. Um, I think everyone is free to, uh, as far as I’m concerned, to have their own sexuality and their own sexual relationships of whatever kind they want to have, provided there’s no sort of abuse involved. Uh, and uh, and that applies to me too.

Both Kathleen and Elizabeth believe in the right of individuals to participate in whatever sexual practices they consider pleasurable, without judgement from others. Elizabeth clearly identifies this in her reference to
people having “their own sexuality” of “whatever kind”. Kathleen alludes to this in her comments about liking to watch and do certain things, but disliking watching and doing other things. For her, this is all a matter of individual choice and consent. Such a view of sex is underpinned by the notions of individual autonomy and sameness. For Kathleen and Elizabeth, it is precisely because all people are equal, independent beings that they are accorded free choice and that others must be tolerant.

This kind of understanding was also reflected in respondents’ understanding of broader social relations. For them, individual sameness and autonomy pertained not only to sexual relations, but to broader social relations. They believed that the rights they possessed in terms of the law, work or education were also applicable to sex. For instance, Nadine’s narrative about feminism, a topic I introduced in order to gain a sense of how women viewed social relations, reflects the concept of individualism present in Kathleen’s and Elizabeth’s earlier narratives on sex:

Nadine: I don’t consider myself a feminist. But I don’t consider myself a, you know, like the other sort of way, you know like letting the guys sort of take over all the medical jobs and doing all this sort of thing. I just feel as though you’ve got to treat everyone sort of [p] well you know equally but not as though, you know like treating, some feminists sort of um seem to want females to do things regardless of how good they are at doing them just because they’re females. And I’m sort of not really into that sort of, not really into the whole you know just because you’re female you can do it because that’s not necessarily true. So I’m more about, yeah, like one’s ability, you know like an individual ability.
Here, Nadine constructs social relations in terms of equally capable, autonomous individuals. The idea of individual sameness is also seen in Johanna’s *contrastive* narrative:

Johanna: I guess why I’m saying I’m not a feminist, even though I think women should have rights and all that sort of thing, but I think that this year and age that should just be the way it is and we shouldn’t really have to discuss it anymore. When I see feminists I see them more as the hard core women who just push issues too far I think... it doesn’t matter what colour, what sex, what the background, everybody should just be the same.

Like Nadine, Johanna views social relations as a composite of equally situated, autonomous individuals. For her, gender, race and other structuring social forces are less important than the equality each person is attributed based on his or her inherent sameness to others. Indeed, it is because Johanna and Nadine see the world in terms of individuality, autonomy and sameness that their assertions about feminism emerge. A movement such as feminism is viewed as unnecessary when, from the beginning, we are all inherently equal.

Nadine’s and Johanna’s view of social relations is underpinned by the same ideas that construct Kathleen’s and Elizabeth’s beliefs about sex. All four women talk about individual autonomy and sameness. Such autonomy and sameness accords women the right to equal access to education and employment, as Johanna and Nadine attest, and it affords women the right to sexual free choice, as Kathleen and Elizabeth suggest.
Chapter Five: Discourses of respectability, equality and biology

Constructing sex as the practice of equal and autonomous individuals permitted respondents to locate themselves as sexual subjects. Here, women did not see themselves as the objects of male sexual desire. Rather, the discourse of citizenship allowed them to claim possession of an active sexuality. Nicole’s comments demonstrate such a claim:

Nicole: It just pisses me off that they [men] always think that they are the ones doing the fucking. Always. They just assume because of the anatomy that they are the ones doing the fucking. Well, they’re not. Absolutely not. So I like it when I can have my way with a guy.

Nicole fervently objects to what she sees as men’s tendency to position themselves as the sexual subject – “the ones doing the fucking”. She insists on the existence of her own active sexuality. Importantly, Nicole’s narrative alludes to the way in which the concept of citizenship is based on “having what men have”. In Nicole’s view, if men can be “the ones doing the fucking”, then so, too, can she. Crucially, it is the idea of gender sameness that permits Nicole the right to have what men have, in this case to be an equal sexual subject. It is because Nicole believes she is the same as a man that she feels she is entitled to the sexual privileges that have traditionally been men’s.

An undercurrent in all of the preceding narratives is the respondents’ demand for inclusion and enfranchisement. That is, women’s talk demonstrates a claim to a “form of belonging”, which, as Weeks (1998: 35) asserts, “is what citizenship is ultimately about”. For them, the right to equality in the “public” world of law, welfare and education also applies to
the personal aspects of life: bodies, feelings, relationships and identities (Weeks, 1998: 37; Plummer, 1995: 151). Thus, through their talk about individual sameness and autonomy, respondents make claims about taking their place as equal sexual citizens. Yet, importantly, as Nicole’s narrative suggests, the “form of belonging” asserted in women’s claims to citizenship is modelled on masculine sexuality. Consequently, as will be demonstrated, the rights and responsibilities women are accorded are also modelled on masculine sexuality.

**Theme two: What do women understand to be their sexual rights?**

The following excerpts identify and explore what women recognised as their sexual rights. The main rights identified were those of sexual self-determination and sexual pleasure.

**Talk about women’s right to sexual self-determination**

Respondents generally espoused what they understood as their right to sexual freedom. For them, this meant being entitled to act on their sexual desire, freely pursue sex with men, and determine the circumstances and practices of their sexual encounters. Many women repudiated the “old-fashioned” idea that sex can only be had within the confines of a loving, committed relationship. Instead, they believed in their right to freely pursue sex outside of such relationships. Caroline’s story demonstrates her belief in such an entitlement:

Caroline: I once hired a hotel, a motel room for half a day to have sex [laugh], just to have sex with the, with the bottle shop guy. Uh, he was the 28 year old... I paid him for it.
Caroline: I went up to him and I said “you’re gorgeous”. And I always used to stare him up and say “isn’t he beautiful? He’s so gorgeous”... he said “oh, I’ll root you if you pay me”. And I said “how much?” He said “oh” I said “I’ll give you $150 and I’ll pay the motel room”. He said “OK, you’re on”. And so we did [laugh].

Here, there is no talk of love and commitment. For Caroline, sex is justified because of her desire. It is the basis of her entitlement to engage in sex. Yet, her narrative also suggests that such entitlement is informed by masculinist understandings of sexuality, as reflected in the account of her predatory pursuit of “the bottle shop guy”. She unabashedly describes how she “stares him up”, constructing him as an object of her sexual desire. For Caroline, the right to sexual freedom means being able to pursue and have sex like a man.

Other respondents also expressed a belief in their right to sexual freedom but they did so primarily through talk about establishing constraints on what they saw as sordid or inappropriate practice. In the following habitual narrative, Katy, for example, explains her refusal to engage in what she calls “doggy style” sex:

Katy: I hate doggy style. I feel like I’m being used. I don’t know why. And I don’t think it’s very intimate. You feel like it’s more like the male’s fantasy rather than like intimacy and love and all that.

Katy believes that “doggy style” sex detracts from emotional intimacy and, for this reason, she dislikes it. It is because Katy believes in her right to sexual self-determination that she can refuse “doggy style” sex. She
believes that she is entitled to reject anything that she deems to be unenjoyable, non-intimate sex practice. Nadine expresses a similar belief when it comes to fellatio:

Nadine: It’s sort of like if I did that to them then I would want them to think of that as not just a sexual act. Not just a whole sort of like, that you see on you know pornographic films, that you see with the guy with his hand on [her head]. Like I can’t stand that. And I say, and I say to Adam “look if you touch my head or my hair during this, I’m going to you know I’m just going to stop and, you know, go out”.

Like Katy, Nadine believes she is entitled to prescribe the conditions under which she performs fellatio.

Caroline, Nadine and Katy believe in their right to sexual self-determination. For all of them, this means being able to freely choose and pursue sex partners, and to exercise bodily autonomy. For Nadine and Katy it involves boundaries of the kind of practices they will perform. However, Caroline’s narrative hints at the way in which this right is formulated in terms of a male model of sexuality where women have the right to pursue men as sex objects and, indeed, to have sex like a man.

**Talk about women’s right to sexual pleasure**

Talk about rights to sexual self-determination was coupled with talk about entitlement to sexual pleasure. For the most part, the latter was characterised by frustration with the way in which sexual pleasure is equated with orgasm. The respondents believed the right to pleasure needed to be accompanied by the right to determine sexual pleasure on their own terms. They expressed considerable frustration with the
As Deidre’s comments about sex with her husband suggest, access to pleasure is an absolute right:

**JB** So did you find your sex life with him pleasurable?

**Deidre:** It was pleasurable, yes. Otherwise I wouldn’t have kept on!

[laugh]

**JB** Yes, fair enough.

**Deidre:** Well, I have to be pleased.

For Deidre, there is little point in engaging in sex unless her pleasure is a priority. Clare also believes in such a right and protests when her pleasure is ignored:

**Clare:** I just found [p] that sex wasn’t really what I expected. It was just [p] it was like this boring, at times painful ritual that I was just not really interested in, you know. I was like “well the only one that’s really getting any pleasure out of this is you, not me”. And when, you know, I sort of started to learn, from that point that, you know, that idea of, oh, after the fact, after they’ve blown their load and, you know, everything was wonderful for them, you know, it was “oh was it good for you” kind of thing. Like it was always an after thought, whether the woman actually enjoyed it. And I was like “oh fuck, well, this is a, you know, a waste of time”.

Clare clearly believes in her right to pleasure during sex. When she feels that her partner ignores this right, she feels frustrated and dissatisfied. Yet, Clare not only believes in her right to sexual pleasure but also her right to pleasure on her terms. She objects to the way in which pleasure is
equated with male orgasm, as revealed in her narrative about Matthew, her de facto partner of two years:

Clare: I found sex to be, um, really bad. Like with him, yeah I didn’t enjoy it hardly at all… I just found it was the same thing of “oh was it good for you love” after the fact. Like, it was as soon as that sort of, um, as soon as they got going [p], you know the end result of then getting an orgasm was the be all and end all. And I found that to be really yucky.

The focus on orgasm is also a concern for Nadine who expresses discontent at what she feels is her boyfriend’s focus on her orgasm:

Nadine: He always sort of gets me to be on top because that’s the position [in] which I always orgasm. And he always does that and I’m always like “well you don’t have to do this just so as I do it [orgasm] because I enjoy it regardless of whether I orgasm”. If I orgasm, you know, I really like it but it doesn’t mean that I don’t like it if I don’t.

Certainly, Clare and Nadine believe in their right to sexual pleasure but, importantly, they believe in their right to define pleasure. For both, orgasm is viewed as pleasurable but it is not the only enjoyable aspect of sex. Indeed, as Sue demonstrates, many respondents defined sexual pleasure in much broader terms:

JB What constitutes good sex for you?

Sue: Oh I think relaxing. Um, no pressure, no pressure to, you know, have an orgasm with my partner. Um, [p] um, [p] I think just kind of losing myself in it. Like music, I think the sort of sex I like is where, you know, the lights are off, um, you know, you’re lost in the sensuality in it and whatever happens, happens. And there is no fear or apprehension that it’s going to hurt or you know, there’s not going to be consequences and things like that. You’re sort of feeling safe and secure and it’s sensual.
Here, Sue captures the broad pleasures that women described: emotional safety, caring and commitment, bodily sensuality, transcendence. Women reported enjoying orgasm but, for most, this was part of a spectrum of sexual pleasures that included a broad range of practices, emotions, and bodily sensations. Nadine, for example, described the pleasure of being on top and Clare talked about the pleasure of dressing up and role playing. Thus, respondents felt entitled to pleasure but, importantly, they believed in their right to pleasure on their own terms. Their narratives show how the discourse of sexual citizenship affords them the right to pleasure but not the right to define such pleasure.

Theme three: What do women understand to be their sexual responsibilities?

In talking about their own sexual rights, respondents invariably mentioned those of their male sex partners. Women believed that the rights of their sex partner translated into responsibilities for themselves. Such responsibility applied to ensuring that their partner experienced pleasure, as evident in Nadine’s narrative about oral sex:

Nadine: There was pressure at the beginning of the relationship, you know. He would do that [oral sex] to me and I wouldn’t do that. And I, like pressure that I put on myself, you know, sort of like, “Well that’s really, I don’t think that’s really fair Nadine”.

Nadine’s sense of responsibility can be seen in the pressure that she puts on herself to perform fellatio. Her need to be “fair” to her partner derives from the fact that he is doing it to her: he is fulfilling his responsibility and,
therefore, so must she. Johanna’s narrative demonstrates the same theme:

JB So why did you actually go ahead and do it [fellatio] when you did finally?

Johanna: Well because [p] well one of the reasons was because he was doing it to me and I thought well it’s a bit unfair [laugh] for him to miss out.

Like Nadine, Johanna feels responsibility to reciprocate.

It is important to point out how the responsibility to provide sexual pleasure here is different from the notion of sexual obligation discussed in the discourse of the “proper girlfriend”. In the latter, women are positioned as providers of sexual pleasure but do not, in turn, expect pleasure. This is because women are positioned as passively asexual and therefore incapable of pleasure. Thus, the “proper girlfriend” discourse lacks the dimension of reciprocity. Here, however, women are positioned as equal to their male partners. While they are expected to provide pleasure, they also expect pleasure themselves. Women provide pleasure to their male partners because of the requirement of reciprocity and responsibility associated with sexual citizenship.

**Citizenship formulated in terms of masculine sexuality**

The discourse of citizenship in respondents talk offers women active sexuality. The notions of individual autonomy and sameness accord women the opportunity to locate themselves as sexual subjects. Claiming a subject position enables women to recognise the existence of, and
articulate the qualities of, their sexual desire and pleasure outside of the
good/bad dichotomy that beleaguer the “proper girlfriend” discourse.
Here, women can be desiring and pleasure-seeking without being
constructed as the “bloody prostitute”.

Yet, as women’s narratives demonstrate, the discourse of sexual
citizenship they describe is formulated in masculinist terms. The active
sexuality offered to women is effectively active masculine sexuality. This
basically involves the privileges that have traditionally belonged to men:
the right to bodily autonomy, the right to prey upon and objectify one’s sex
partner and the right to orgasm. Crawford, Kippax and Waldby (1994)
recognise this when they comment that women are “allowed to desire sex,
although only in terms of what is ostensibly a male model of sex, where
sex is equated with penetration” (p. 582). Respondents reported frustration
with such a male-centred idea of pleasure and expressed desire for a
range of sexual experiences involving emotions, broad physical sensation
and transcendence. Crucially, however, the notion of sameness that
underpins the discourse of citizenship obfuscates the way that sexual
rights are modelled on the male experience of sex. As a result, there are
discursive constraints on women’s opportunity to redefine sexual pleasure
on their own terms. Women face obstacles to forging new understandings
of pleasure when the premise of citizenship is that each person is the
same and, therefore, entitled to the same pleasures and freedom.
The medico-scientific roots of the discourse of masculine sexual citizenship

The concept of citizenship outlined in respondents’ narratives is predicated on the medico-scientific discourse discussed previously. It is precisely because men and women are seen to have biologically equal sexuality that both are believed to have the same need for sexual gratification and the same right to express such needs. Hollway (1989) recognises this when she comments that “sexuality signifies as a natural property of individuals which, because it spontaneously exists (asocially), has a right to be expressed” (p. 56). Moreover, such inherent sexual drives are seen to be uncontrollable, both for men and women (Hollway, 1984: 234) and, in this way, the construction of sexuality in this discourse of sexual entitlement involves simply applying the assumptions of the “male sex drive discourse” and unruly masculine sexuality to women.

The masculine sexual citizen versus the “democratisation of sexuality”

Through their talk, respondents clearly make claims to “a new form of belonging”, which, as Weeks (1998: 35) asserts, is ultimately what citizenship is about. Yet, by using a masculine model of sexuality to formulate such rights, respondents construct a version of sexual citizenship that differs substantially from the idea of sexual citizenship articulated in the literature. It is in comparing the two that the significant shortcomings of the discourse of masculine sexual citizenship are evident.
Sexual citizenship is related to other forms of citizenship in that it involves claims to inclusion, belonging, equity, and justice and is about “rights balanced by new responsibilities” (Weeks, 1998: 39). That is, people use the construct of citizenship to claim sexual equality. But, for authors like Weeks (1998: 40) and Connell (1995: 390), the concept of sexual citizenship depends on the “democratisation of relationships”. Connell (1995) describes such “democratisation” as a process involving “equalizing resources, creating means of shared decision making, and making sure the process continues into the future” (p. 390). For Connell (1995), the equalising of resources means not only creating material equality but also creating equality of knowledge and respect. Here, individuals should ideally be able to negotiate sex without the threat of discreditation or violence. Moreover, with his idea of shared decision making Connell (1995) applies “the classical conception of democracy, direct rule by the citizen” (p. 391) to sexual relations where all individuals would be equally involved in the “joint project” of negotiating sexuality.

Weeks (1998: 41) also links claims to sexual citizenship to democratic relationships when he argues that the concept of sexual citizenship emerged from the “detraditionalisation” of western culture and the concomitant shift towards egalitarian relationships. He describes how traditional bastions of social authority have been undermined in recent years, for instance by the civil rights and women’s movement. This “detraditionalisation”, combined with a shift towards egalitarian
relationships wherein people form relationships based on love, openness and equality, has resulted in these new claims to citizenship.

Allanah Ryan (2000) proposes that Weeks (1998) and Connell’s (1995) ideas of democratic relations generate a kind of “mutuality” where “each individual’s ability to seek and obtain the pleasures and emotional satisfactions desired are reliant on the reciprocal recognition of the other” (p. 96). For Ryan (2000), such mutuality provides a more promising source for women’s sexual freedom than traditional feminist frameworks of “independence” or “woman-centeredness” because sex, to her, is an inherently relational practice (p. 103).

This version of sexual citizenship, only achieved through democratic relations, constructs sex as a practice of equal, autonomous, mutually respecting individuals. They negotiate the terms and conditions of sex on a basis of equal knowledge, of emotional and physical safety, and in accordance with the right of each participant to define sexual pleasure on his or her own terms. Here, there is none of the objectification, predation or conquering of sex partners that is evident in some of the respondents’ construction of sexual rights. Moreover, sexual citizens are not compelled to accept the goal-oriented sexual pleasure that so many of the respondents eschew.

By using a male model of sexuality to define their sexual rights, respondents’ construction of sexual citizenship loses the notions of
democracy, mutuality, negotiation, sharing and respect evident in the literature. Thus, while women assert their place as equal sexual citizens, they formulate their sexual rights on a male model of sexuality where predation and objectification are emphasised and pleasure is narrowly defined.

Despite its shortcomings, respondents’ masculinist construction of sexual citizenship offers the only means through which they can access active sexuality. Unlike the discourse of the “proper girlfriend” where women are constructed as sexually passive, the discourse of “sexual equality” affords women the right to pursue their sexual desires, offering them access to sexual pleasure, albeit not on their own terms.

**Conclusion**

Respondents’ talk about their sexual experiences reveals two distinct discursive representations of feminine sexuality: the responsive, “proper” wife/girlfriend and the actively desiring, autonomous “sexual citizen”. Each of these is underpinned by an understanding of sexuality as a natural, uniquely expressed personal attribute. Women are viewed as either inherently reproductively-driven and, consequently, sexually passive, or as naturally equal to men and, therefore, actively desiring and pleasure-seeking.

Intriguingly, in talking about their sexual experiences, women often used both accounts of feminine sexuality to give meaning to their experiences.
That is, during some parts of the interview respondents talked about themselves as sexually equal, uncontrollably passionate, and pleasure-seeking; yet, at other times, they talked about romance, obligation, and respectability. In doing so, they generated and communicated feelings of confusion, self-doubt, guilt and regret. For me, this highlighted the way that these discursive images do not provide full understanding to women’s sexual experiences. That is, women did not straightforwardly and unthinkingly “perform” according to the edicts of these discourses, as if they were scripts, roles or omnipotent knowledge-power regimes. Rather, they dynamically engaged with the meanings of discourse as emotional, embodied beings in a way that, on occasion, resulted in transformative moments. The following chapter examines these dynamic experiences more fully by exploring how the discourses presented here are brought into being in women’s sexual practice.
Chapter Six

Embodied sex practice: pursuing respectability, equality and pleasure

This chapter addresses the second major research question that structures this study: how are the discourses of feminine sexuality outlined in the previous chapter related to women’s sex practices?

Early in the research process it became clear that women’s sexual experiences were not a straightforward product of the discourses of feminine sexuality. Although respondents gave meaning to their sexual experiences through the discursively constructed images of the “proper” woman or masculinised “sexual citizen”, such discourses did not capture the entirety of their experiences. Instead, the life histories of respondents demonstrate the way that women themselves bring the meanings of discourse into being through their sex practice. Central to much of the respondents’ talk was the way in which bodily practice was dynamically caught up in the production of their sexual experiences.
The first part of the chapter presents the life story of Deidre whose narratives show how the “proper” woman is pursued, incorporated and given meaning through her sex practice. Correspondingly, the life history of Nicole is presented to demonstrate how the masculinised “sexual citizen” is pursued and brought into being through her sex practice. Importantly, both Deidre’s and Nicole’s life histories reveal the way in which they themselves play active roles in shaping their own sex experiences. The second part of the chapter presents the life history of Elena whose narratives provide insight into the way in which bodies and bodily sensations, in and of themselves, are implicated in the making of sex practice.

Deidre: pursuit of the “proper”, respectable woman

Deidre’s narratives construct a life story that has been powerfully shaped by the discourse of the “proper” woman. For Deidre, sex was characterised by her desire to constitute her relationship with her male partners as loving and committed: it was intimately related to her role as a loved girlfriend or wife. Importantly, however, Deidre’s narratives reveal that her constitution as the “proper” woman did not arise from a simple act of unconscious acquiescence to the discursive “exterior”.

Deidre is an independent, tenacious and intelligent woman. She was 79 years old at the time of her interview and had been divorced for 25 years. She grew up in the country as the second eldest of five children. Her father owned and operated a small business. Deidre’s parents were well-
educated, socially-minded people and she describes them as “a force in the town”. Her mother, especially, was influential because of her long-term involvement with the Country Women’s Association. Deidre’s mother’s feminist values were a significant force in shaping Deidre’s own interest in politics and social issues.

As a teenager, life in the country was very exciting for Deidre. At the beginning of the Second World War a military camp was built on the outskirts of town and it provided a source of social activities for Deidre and the other local girls. They were regularly invited to social events at the camp. The combination of the soldiers and the local farmers meant that there were numerous men for Deidre and her friends to choose from.

At sixteen, Deidre and her sister were sent to Sydney to train as nurses. They spent a lot of time travelling between Sydney and home. It was during such a trip that Deidre had her first experience with uninvited masculine sexual attention:

Deidre: When I was sixteen a man tried creeping up my leg and frightened the life out of me. And I got absolutely horrified, terrified. My mother used to let us go off by ourselves… I was sixteen, in charge of Margaret [sister] who is fourteen. So I’m in charge, well, you know, we took our responsibilities very keenly. And there was nothing untoward at all with boys. But coming home on the train, the instruction was to come on the day, day, I don’t think there was a day train, never, ever, the night train, and this happened, you know, and this man trying to kiss me. Ooohhh! Nearly made me sick. And I rushed in the toilet to be sick then I thought I better go back to him because he might be doing it to Margaret. And he wasn’t but he, he got out at [country town] from there. But you know I was horrified.
This experience scared Deidre. She learned that men could be predators and, indeed, that male sexuality could be “horrifying” and “sickening”. This experience challenged Deidre’s earlier fun experiences with men and she began to develop an idea of male sexuality as something that required management:

Deidre: And then I had another, uh, nasty encounter. I came home from leave when I was in the [unclear], by that time I was, you know, 21 or 2 or 3 and I was learning to cope with them.

For Deidre, men’s sexual needs were something that women had to cope with. Implicit in her comments is the assumption that men themselves cannot manage their own sexual urges. Instead, it is women that must manage them. Such comments reflect the construction of male sexuality present in the “complementary” account of natural sexuality outlined in the previous chapter: men have active, uncontrollable sexuality and women passively respond to their needs. For Deidre, these experiences contributed to the developing notion that, while men can be fun and exciting, they can also be predatory and fearsome.

During the several years Deidre spent training as a nurse she became increasingly attracted to the “sophistication” of city life. She was fascinated by art, literature, music and politics and felt these interests could not be met in a country town. She knew, however, that for her a sophisticated city life was only possible by making the right marriage:

Deidre: I could have stayed at home and married a farmer. There were dozens of them after the war. They were all dropping off like flies but, oh I didn’t want a farmer. See I’m, I’m too
different to them. I wanted to see the world and marry somebody who was fascinating and [p] and I thought sophisticated.

Despite her growing aspirations for a sophisticated husband and a stylish city life, Deidre’s first romantic relationships happened with boys from home. It was with one of her boyfriends from the country that she first experienced penetrative sex. She has little memory of her first time but she remembers how it made her feel:

Deidre: It was fun. You know, gives you a good feeling to think that this man thinks you’re pretty good. Oh yeah, I enjoyed sex, as such. Comfort and friendship and I loved the flirting.

For Deidre, the sex was part of the fun and romance of her relationships with men. It affirmed the mutual feelings of care and affection that she felt existed in the relationship and made her feel like a desirable woman. Here, Deidre clearly constructs her experiences through the framework of the “proper” woman. She engages in sex because it renders her a valued heterosexual woman. She does not talk about her own bodily desire or passion and, in that, she constructs herself as non-desiring and sexually passive.

It is important to note, however, that Deidre engaged in sex during a time when pre-marital sex was not acceptable, particularly for women. This demonstrates that she was not wholly compliant with the prescriptions of “proper” feminine sexuality. Indeed, she suggests several times during her interview that part of the enjoyment of sex came from the fact that it was rebellious:
Deidre: I think also the fact that it was illegal, you know it was subversive, gave it an extra thrill.

Thus, Deidre gives meaning to her sex practice through the dichotomous construct of feminine sexuality as either loving and innocent or desiring and immoral. Sometimes she embraces the notion of the “proper” woman and engages in sex out of love, romance and commitment. At other times, however, she repudiates the “proper” woman and revels in the dissidence of being “the whore”.

Indeed, Deidre’s sexual experiences in her early twenties continued to be characterised by such contradictions until her defiance caught up with her and she became pregnant. She knew that her boyfriend would not marry her so her only option was an abortion:

Deidre: I went to this doctor. He said “yes, you’re pregnant”. I even used my single name. I was determined not to [p] you know [unclear] this out. Uh, he said um, he can’t do anything. But he gave me a number to ring. I rang the number and the bloke said “yes, we’ll help you, uh, meet us on the corner of [street name] and something street, we will be there in a car”. And I did. My god, terrified!

JB: I bet you were.

Deidre: We drove to a place in [suburb], a house, a very innocent looking house. There was a woman and a man and they said “wait here” and there were other women there, uh, young, middling. Uh, we didn’t talk much [p] and then it was my turn, I could hear screaming, oh god [sigh].

JB how horrible.

Deidre: I hate pain and they clamped it down and they pretended it was something, gas, but it wasn’t. It went on and on and on, scrape, scraping you inside, like a cheese grater. Ooohh!

JB oh that’s not nice.
Deidre: Oh god! They said “oh what do you do?” and I said nursing, they said “these nurses are always the worst”. I’d left it, oh well you know it was pretty advanced, oh I don’t think it was three months but it was, it didn’t want to come away. Anyway it did and I got over it, I went back and stayed with a [big sigh] stayed at my mothers friend. And I’d told her and she said “oh well come and stay the night here”. Well, by that time she’d had time to think it over, silly old duck. And she’d met me at the gate, she said “you can’t come here, you can’t come here, the police might be after you”. I said I have to, blood dripping down my leg. She let me in. It was freezing, freezing cold house. I got in to bed, freezing cold and shivered and cried and stayed the night and couldn’t wait to get back to work… No wonder I haven’t had a lot of sex.

JB You mean because of an experience like that?

Deidre: yeah, yeah.

The experience was both emotionally and physically agonising for Deidre. The illegality of abortion in Australia in the 1940s (Matthews, 1984: 136) meant that Deidre was forced to be secretive. She had no choice but to submit herself to the potentially dangerous methods and devices of an illegal and unregulated medical practice. She had to entrust her safety to dubious chauffeurs and disapproving nurses and doctors. The risk inherent in such an undertaking is most evident in the fact that she left the “clinic” bleeding.

Here, Deidre contravened what Matthews (1984) refers to as the “one legitimate expression of feminine sexuality” (p. 111). In other words, Deidre exercised her sexuality outside of the socially legitimate framework that defines feminine sexuality as heterosexual, monogamous, and legal. The absence of a husband, and therein a legally-sanctioned sexual relationship, identified the pregnant Deidre as “the worst” kind of woman.
Yet, despite all this, Deidre rejected a view of herself as immoral and sexually deviant. She used her own name, refusing to pretend that she was married and, in doing so, rebelled against the repressive discourse of feminine sexuality that constructed her as “the whore”.

By ending her narrative with “no wonder I haven’t had a lot of sex”, Deidre acknowledges the way in which the abortion experience changed her subsequent sexual experiences. For her, the abortion was pivotal. Being positioned as the “immoral whore” gave credence to her then developing notion that it is men that are sexual and not women. Deidre learned earlier that men could be overtly sexual and predatory and, here, she learned that women who express any kind of sexuality are subject to personal denigration and legal repercussions. In becoming pregnant, Deidre had contravened the injunctions of the “proper” woman and suffered the consequences. From this point, she had little choice but to attempt to correct her wrongdoings and re-establish her “proper” femininity.

The abortion led to the end of Deidre’s relationship with her boyfriend. In need of a change, she organised a trip to Britain. It was on the journey there that she met John, her future husband:

Deidre: We were a couple of weeks out and there was a lot of talk about this gorgeous man on the boat. And, um, and he played cards and I thought “oh well I’m not interested, I don’t play cards”. But, anyway, I finally met him on the steps, on the stairs of the ship. And [laugh] and we were inseparable from then on. I’d felt that I had got the prize.
For Deidre, John represented everything that the men in her home town were not. He was American and therefore, to her, exotic. He had travelled all over the world before ending up in Australia and, being ten years older than her, she saw him as the fascinating and “knowing” man that she had always dreamt about. As Deidre suggests, many other women on the ship felt the same way about John. But it was Deidre that “got the prize”. John represented the sophisticated husband that could not only provide her with the stylish life she dreamt about but also establish her as a moral and valued “good” woman.

Deidre and John married when they arrived in England and had their first child soon after. It was not until they returned to Australia several years later that Deidre began to feel the marriage was a mistake. John’s inability to maintain a job meant that they had very little money. Deidre’s parents, wanting to retire from their business, suggested they move back to the country so that John could run the family business. Deidre felt humiliated by John’s increasingly obvious incompetence and felt miserable knowing that her romantic dream of a sophisticated life was slipping away:

Deidre: It was a terrible homecoming because we were, you know, the bottom of the heap. All my friends were, well not all my friends, were doctors and lawyers and things. And John is obviously penniless because we live in the flat above my father’s shop and he works for dad. So it was a matter of great [p] shame although I carried it off like I didn’t give a stuff, but I did. It hurt a great deal.
After several years and the birth of their second child the shop went broke, an event that Deidre blames on John’s incompetence. Humiliated, she decided to move the family away to a job managing a motel:

Deidre: When we got the job running the motel I said to my husband, I, we went broke, I will volunteer, because he hadn’t paid all the bills to the, to the you know - and that horrified me because here was my father in business for god knows how many years, absolutely impeccable, and here was John letting the bills pile up and didn’t even tell me. So when we got the job I said “look, I will pay all the bills. All I’m asking you to do is pay the insurance and the car payments regularly”. Couldn’t even do that. I had to write to the insurance people and the car people and they both said “fine, we understand”. You know, things like that you can’t get over, can you? Two little kids depending on it.

The family spent eleven years at the motel, a life that Deidre describes as hard with long working hours and little money. John spent much of his time at the local pub while Deidre cleaned and managed the motel. They lived in a small unit at the back of the motel with one bedroom in which the children slept while Deidre and John slept in the dining room. By this time, Deidre was accepting that John was incapable of fulfilling his role as head of the family. To her, he was indecisive and lazy. If the family was to survive it would have to be her that made the decisions and earned an income. She knew by this time that the marriage was a failure:

Deidre: I knew that the marriage was [p] doomed. But I knew I couldn’t work with him but it was the only way that I could get any pride or any money at all.

For a woman at this time, the early 1960s, divorce was not a viable option. A legal divorce was difficult to obtain (Matthews, 1984: 142) but, more importantly for Deidre, a divorce would severely undermine her pursuit of
“proper” femininity – the only way she “could get any pride”. It was through her marriage that Deidre maintained her grasp on the “good” and valued woman. A divorce would mean that she could once again be threatened as “the whore”. As Matthews (1984) asserts, “divorce reduced a woman to a single state, without the protection of a man, an anomalous and vulnerable position” (p. 142). So, despite the unhappy circumstances of her marriage, Deidre decided to stay with John because, as Matthews (1984: 143) suggests, “the sanctity of marriage and the straitjacket of femininity demanded [her] constant capitulation”.

Deidre’s obligation to her marriage and realisation of its failure was mirrored in her sexual experiences during this part of her life. Initially, sex with John was characterised by emotional intimacy, romance and fun. She describes how they used to have sex in the backyard in the summer:

Deidre: We’d have a rug out there. We’d make love out there. I called it making love. It was more than sex, it was better than sex. I suppose, I don’t know how can I say that, but I don’t really know.

JB I understand.

Deidre: It was good. It was fun.

During this time, sex with John was an emotionally-infused, almost indefinable experience for Deidre. The sex represented their relationship and their love and commitment to each other. It was from this kind of emotional-sexual experience that Deidre gained pleasure. For her, sexual pleasure was not about bodily sensation and orgasm but rather about intimacy and sharing.
Indeed, it was precisely because Deidre approached sex in this way that she eventually stopped engaging in it. After ten years of emotional neglect, poverty and overwork, Deidre decided that she could no longer have sex with her husband:

Deidre: I couldn’t have sex with someone who didn’t care for me. He didn’t. He still loves me he says when I tried to divorce him. It was all over and he’d still call me his wife. But I, I just don’t think that’s what sex is for. If you’re not happy together I couldn’t see why I should bother. And I said “no, leave me alone, don’t touch me” and that was the end of me running around the house naked.

Deidre’s construction of sex as an expression of love means, quite simply, that if there is no love there can be no sex.

By the time Deidre was 40, her capacity to maintain the impression of a successful marriage - and her identity as a “proper” woman - was diminished. The incessant poverty, long hours of work and heavy responsibility culminated in what Deidre calls “a nervous breakdown”. It was during this time of confusion that she decided to move the family to another motel job. Circumstances at the new job were bad. They had little money and John could not find work. The family ended up living in a caravan. Deidre reached a crisis point:

Deidre: I fell to pieces there. I started having a nervous breakdown and should never have gone to [country town], should never have moved from [country town]. I should have had the breakdown there and somebody would have looked after me but, oh god it was awful.
The constant effort to maintain an outward impression of a comfortable and content family - and a loved and valued wife – had taken a toll on Deidre. The disjuncture between her romantic expectations of marriage and the reality of her life led to disintegration reminiscent of what Ussher (1997a) refers to as “the annihilation of the self” (p. 448). It was because of Deidre’s persistent pursuit of “being girl” – that is, her determined effort to live the heterosexual romantic dream – that she lost her sense of self-worth. Indeed, as Matthews (1984: 8) asserts, the pursuit of the inconsistent and idealised image of femininity inevitably results in failure. Deidre could no longer maintain the impossible standard of the “proper” woman.

In the end, the family had no option but to return to live with Deidre’s mother. They were destitute. Deidre was unable to work and John was uninterested in working. For Deidre, returning to her mother was yet another humiliation in a long procession of humiliating experiences. Yet, it was at this time, the lowest point in her life, that a pivotal event happened for Deidre: she got a job with the municipal council.

It was the early 1970s and the council was establishing a feminist-based community health program for women. Her earlier interest in social issues and politics – all things sophisticated and fascinating - was reborn in her enthusiasm for feminism. She became involved in local women’s groups, attended rallies and inter-state conferences. Indeed, in the end, it was
feminist ideas that encouraged and gave validation to Deidre’s decision to divorce John:

Deidre: Of course it [feminism] was instrumental in my divorce. I wasn’t going to put up with that rubbish any longer.

After 25 years together, Deidre left John. Her interest in politics and art flourished. She attended TAFE to establish her career as a community health worker and eventually left the country to follow her grown children to Sydney. Although Deidre had several sexual relationships with men after her divorce, she did not have another long-term, emotionally engaged, sexual relationship.

Deidre’s narratives disclose a life in which the discourse of “proper” feminine sexuality is actively pursued. Her practice does not arise from a passive inscription of an unassailable, power-knowledge regime. Rather, Deidre engages in sex in order to give meanings of love and commitment to her relationships with men, and this valourises her femininity. In the process, she is an active player in the “making” of her own sexual life experiences.

Moreover, Deidre’s narratives demonstrate that such a pursuit is fraught with tension and resistance. Often, Deidre steadfastly pursued her constitution as “proper”; yet, at other times, she actively resisted it, revelling in being “the whore” and expressing defiance. Such resistance engendered the danger of becoming “the worst” kind of woman and so Deidre’s pursuit of “proper” feminine sexuality necessitated her careful
negotiation between the opposing constructs of the “proper” wife and “the whore”. Thus, importantly, Deidre’s life story illustrates how her pursuit of “proper” feminine sexuality was not uniform and stable but it was, nevertheless, always a product of her own active engagement.

Nicole: the pursuit of being like a man

Nicole’s narratives reveal a life in which the discourse of the masculine “sexual citizen” is actively pursued. Through her sex practice, Nicole pursues sexual equality with men. However, this is a highly contested project. Being a man’s sexual equal is a short-lived, momentary “achievement” and is often thwarted by Nicole’s concomitant desire to be a “proper”, valued heterosexual woman.

Nicole moved to Sydney one year before my interview with her. She was 26 years old and pursuing a financial career with a multi-national bank. Her move to Sydney was motivated by the breakdown of her marriage one year before. Nicole grew up in a large metropolitan city as the older of two daughters from a wealthy family. From the beginning, Nicole felt she was different from other girls:

Nicole: I had my own little niche as far as the personality was concerned. And um, because I was such a tomboy I think when it came to guys [p] they were probably attracted to my strength, not physical, but I mean as not being the little girly girl. I wasn’t the, you know, hair done perfectly and make up and always shave my legs and you know. I wasn’t like that at all.
Nicole defines her femininity in contrast to what she sees to be the vanity and fragility of other girls. Her sense of self-worth derives from her “strength”, which she believes is something that men find attractive. Nicole’s narrative is suggestive of her dichotomous understanding of masculinity and femininity as, correspondingly, strong and weak. Importantly, her negation of “girly”, weak femininity is representative of her belief that a valued femininity is one that is predicated on masculinity. That is, for Nicole, being equal to a man means being like a man. As will be demonstrated, such an understanding shaped many of her sexual experiences.

Nicole’s first experience with penetrative sex occurred when she was seventeen. She was on a weekend retreat with her family and met a man much older than herself. He was at the retreat with his wife and small children:

Nicole: We were flirting and you can always tell. Body language is the most incredible thing and you can just tell. I just knew something was going to happen. And so he did, the bastard. He planned the whole thing. Four o’clock in the morning on the Saturday night he leads me upstairs and he’d laid out this parachute and there’s candles and the whole thing. And he just knew he was going to get it. So, he did. And, um, it wasn’t, it wasn’t horrendous. I think I was just so nervous and didn’t want to look like a little girl idiot. And then I saw his wedding ring glinting in the light and I thought “oh no”. And for about an hour after that I just sat in the shower and we didn’t use a condom so I was paranoid about getting pregnant. So, I was [laughing] just jumping up and down in the shower [laughing]. I was so stupid and that was that.

Nicole constructs this experience as one in which she succumbed to the advances of a highly predatory man. Her narrative suggests that she felt
victimised. She was the object of his sexual desire and was “stupidly”
duped into giving up her virginity. However, later in the interview she
claimed a more active part in this experience, constructing it as her own
effort to rid herself of her virginity:

JB: You said before you just wanted to get it over with, is that what
you’re intention was?

Nicole: Yeah, you know at that age and I wasn’t in a serious long
term relationship and I really wasn’t gonna wait for Mr. Right
to come along and that whole thing. So it was kind of just
you know whoever’s offering [laugh]. Take it! [laugh]

JB: Why do you think you just wanted to get it over with?

Nicole: Uh, because I mean I don’t know if you remember being a
teenager and the whole virginity thing and you have to wait
for someone you love and you have to wait to get married
and “are you a slut?”, “aren’t you a slut?” and “what am I?,
should I?, shouldn’t I?” [laugh] There were just too many
questions and too many ifs and I just thought “I’m tired of
wondering when and how and who”. So, I’d rather take
control of it and do it on my terms and just get rid of it.

In this narrative, Nicole repudiates the discourse of “proper” feminine
sexuality: waiting for Mr. Right was tiresome. Instead, she wanted to take
control and determine her own future. Here, then, Nicole is not a sexual
victim but rather a woman that actively determines her own sexual
experience. Both of the preceding narratives display Nicole’s contempt for
the weakness of femininity. She does not want him to see her as “the little
girl idiot”. She proceeds to have sex with him in order to be seen as
strong, mature and equal. Here, Nicole constructs her sex practice through
the discourse of the masculinised “sexual citizen”. By engaging in sex like
a man – outside of a relationship with Mr. Right, with no emotional
attachment, and “on her own terms” – Nicole achieves an understanding of herself as strong, empowered and sexually equal.

Nevertheless, Nicole’s claim to sexual self-determination is laced with notions of the “romantic dream”. When she refers to “Mr. Right”, she suggests that she doesn’t want to wait for him, but she does not suggest that he doesn’t exist. Indeed, Nicole believes that perhaps there is a Mr. Right for her: it is simply that she has not found him. Here, Nicole’s narrative is dense with contradictory meaning: she detests the passivity of the “proper” woman and, at the same time, concedes that the romantic dream exists. Such conflict is perhaps best demonstrated in the form of her talk. The parallel structure of her narrative in combination with the repetitive use of words – “are you a slut? aren’t you a slut? what am I? should I? shouldn’t I?” – communicates the tension and discordance in Nicole’s understanding of her own feminine sexuality. Although she pursues an understanding of herself as sexually equal, she also simultaneously constructs herself as passive and “proper”.

At 22, Nicole met Simon, her husband to be. Nicole describes how Simon was utterly devoted to her. She, on the other hand, was uncertain about her feelings towards him. She disliked his lack of ambition and what she perceived to be his dependence on her. She saw him as weak and emasculated. When he asked her to marry him she hesitantly agreed. Nicole describes their sex life as comfortable and fun. With Simon she felt she could overcome her fears about her body:
JB: Why do you think that your husband was the only one who was able to pleasure you?

Nicole: Um he just was very talented…. I’ve never, I’ve never had a climax through penetration, only through oral sex. And he was just very good at that. And I allowed myself to relax enough for him to do that. Because I consider a guy going down on me more personal than sex.

JB: Mmmm, why do you think its more personal?

Nicole: Because I’m paranoid.

JB: About?

Nicole: All the jokes and [p] yeah and I don’t know with guys I just can’t stand that. I cannot stand that smell. And I just think no matter how many times I’ve washed I’m always paranoid there’s something wrong down there because of all the jokes and if I relax enough then I could enjoy it.

With the devoted love and adoration of Simon, Nicole was able to relax enough to overcome fears about her body. The pleasure of sex with Simon emerged from the comfort of their relationship. For the first time, Nicole learned that her body was not as unpleasant as she believed and that men did not always ridicule women’s bodies.

After eleven months, Nicole left Simon. His apparent weakness and dependence became too much for her. She filed for divorce and moved to Sydney where she entered the current chapter of her sexual life: clubbing, dating and casual sex. She describes the nature of her most recent sexual experiences as emotionally uninvolved:

Nicole: I’ve become a bit cold-hearted about it [laugh] like I’m becoming a man. [laugh]
For the most part, in these recent experiences, it was Nicole who pursued sex and declined invitations for any further relationship, as demonstrated in this story:

Nicole: I had a date with a guy, went out. We have nothing in common whatsoever. I thought “oh well, may as well make the night worth while [by having sex]”. So I came home. I start getting SMS’s from this guy saying “you used me just for sex and I feel so cheap” and I thought “Oh my god!” [laugh]

Nicole enjoys being the sexual predator and engaging in unemotional sex. Indeed, as she herself points out, she is having sex like a man. However, she has mixed feelings about such encounters. While she enjoys the sense of equality she gains from having sex “like a man”, she also feels guilt and self-loathing. These contradicting feelings of delight and regret point towards the way that her pursuit of being “like a man”, and thereby sexually equal, is, for her, highly contested by the discourse of “proper” feminine sexuality that locates her as “the whore” for such practices. This conflict is evident in her narrative about a recent experience in which she had sex with her much older and married boss. The story begins at a Christmas party when she told him she was attracted to him:

Nicole: He didn’t react to that and asked me if I wanted to change teams and I said “oh, god no, please!” Anyway, about a week after that we ended up at another staff party and going back to a colleague’s place. And we got very intimate but we didn’t have sex. We didn’t even kiss but everything, like as I was saying. But I thought “no I’m not screwing up my career just for a night with you”. And um, a year now, almost, I’ve been thinking about this, and what I’ve missed out on, and I should have, and I should have and I should have! And then we did on Friday, this Friday that’s just gone. And it was so good because I was in control the whole time and I knew that I was the one, wasn’t on his terms, I was the one in control.
To Nicole, he represented a sexual conquest. She knew he was married and she was not interested in a relationship with him. Instead, she simply wanted to know that she could “win” him, that she had sexual power over him. Indeed, as she says, she was in control of the situation and of his desire for her. However, the following morning the construction of herself as the sexual conqueror disappeared and she was overcome with feelings of regret and self-loathing:

Nicole: I’m always doing it for the wrong reasons. I’m always doing for a quick fix and the quick fix always turns into a massive guilt run that lasts for a couple of days and it’s just, oh [sigh].... I’ve been analysing Friday night now since Friday night. Friday night, I was so proud of myself that I finally got him; put a little notch on my belt. And then Saturday morning I felt terrible.

JB: Why did you feel terrible?

Nicole: Well, because he’s married and it wasn’t romantic... It was sheer bonking. And that was fine for the night. At that point in time, that’s what we were both after. But I can’t now go back and start analysing what I think is a slut. It’s what I wanted at the moment. It happened so I can’t, I can’t destroy myself analysing, and I do that all the time.

Pride was replaced with guilt. On Friday night she was the sexual conqueror and on Saturday morning she was “the whore”. Thus, while the discourse of “masculine sexual citizenship” dominates Nicole’s understandings of her own sexual experiences, when she translates the image of the sexually equal woman into her sexual practice, she experiences guilt, questions her actions and her morality. Evident here is the way that the discourse of “proper” feminine sexuality undermines Nicole’s pursuit of what she understands to be “equal sexuality”. As she
says, it was because it wasn’t romantic that she felt guilty. Thus, Nicole’s pursuit of sexual equality through the discourse of “sexual citizenship” was thwarted by the image of the “proper girlfriend” and “the whore”.

Nicole’s life history demonstrates the relationship between discourses of feminine sexuality and women’s sex practices. Through her narratives, Nicole reveals a life in which being equal to a man is actively pursued. Here, Nicole’s sex practice does not arise from an exterior imposition of regulatory power. Rather, through her sex practice, Nicole actively pursues and constitutes herself as “equal to a man”. She pursues men as sex objects, sees herself as the “one doing the fucking”, engages in sex as emotionally void practice and claims to come away from sex feeling proud, guilt-free and ready to move on to the next conquest. Yet, significantly, Nicole’s life story powerfully reveals how such a pursuit is laden with tension and resistance. Her pursuit of sexual equality is thwarted by the powerful meanings of the discourse of “proper” femininity. She is at one moment “sexually equal” and at the next “the whore”. Thus, Nicole’s pursuit of being equal to a man is not uniform and stable. Rather, because of the clash of discourses she experiences in her own embodied practice, it is laden with conflict.

**Deidre and Nicole: bringing discourse into being**

The life histories of Deidre and Nicole reveal how the images of feminine sexuality are actively pursued. That is, their sex practice does not arise from an exterior imposition of regulatory power. Rather, both Deidre and
Nicole are agents in the “making” of their own sexual life experiences: they do not “perform” the prescriptions of discourse but rather bring the discursive images of feminine sexuality into being through their sex practice. Moreover, their life stories reveal how their sexual pursuits are neither uniform nor stable but rather fraught with tension and resistance. They must constantly reconstitute themselves in the image of the “proper” or “sexually equal” woman. Their pursuits are complex and dynamic, characterised by moments of resistance, acquiescence and, importantly, as will be discussed, transformation.

As a young, unmarried woman, Deidre engaged in sex as a means of expressing love and commitment in her relationships with her boyfriends. This continued in her marriage where sex was the means through which she imbued her relationship with John with meanings of love and sharing. Accordingly, when she no longer felt love and devotion for him, sex ceased. Importantly, these experiences reveal how Deidre’s sex practice was central in operationalising the meanings of symbolic images of feminine sexuality. Sex is a means through which Deidre brings herself into being as a good, valued and “proper” heterosexual woman.

Nicole’s life history reveals a similar relationship where she brings discursive symbolism into being through her sex practice. When Nicole practises sex “like a man”, she gains a sense of herself as a strong and sexually equal woman, even though, for her, this feeling is short-lived. By seeking casual encounters and pursuing men as sex objects Nicole
constitutes herself in the image of what she understands to be “sexual
equality”. She revels in her sexual conquests - the “notch on the belt” - and
her ostensible ability to be emotionally uninvolved. Thus, in the same way
that Deidre becomes “proper”, Nicole becomes “sexually equal” through
her practice: sex operationalises the meanings of the image of the
“masculine sexual citizen”.

Notably, however, Nicole’s pursuit of what she believes to be “sexual
equality” is a much more highly contested process than Deidre’s pursuit of
being the “proper” woman. Nicole’s narratives communicate a high degree
of conflict and confusion about her experiences. Certainly, she
demonstrates how she gains a sense of “sexual equality” but embedded in
her narratives is the way that she also wants to be the “proper” woman. In
this sense, her life story reveals a simultaneous pursuit of both images
and it is from here that her conflict emerges. It is because she believes
that sexual equality can only be gained through practising sex like a man
that Nicole experiences so much conflict. Yet, such a practice for a woman
is ambiguous since it can produce different kinds of identities, that is, the
woman who is “equal to a man” or, alternatively, “the whore”. But, as will
be discussed, it is precisely because the relationship between discourse
and practice is such a contested and unstable process that it is open to
transformation and potential disruption of prevailing beliefs.

Understanding the relationship between discourse and practice as an
agential but unstable pursuit is only tenable by understanding the
significance of the body. As discussed in Chapter Three, according to Connell (1987, 1995), bodily practice is central to understanding the ways that discourse operates in the social world because it is only through bodily practice that the symbolism of discourse becomes a “real thing”. As he writes “it is essential to recognise that discourse and symbolisation are themselves practice” (Connell, 1987: 242). Bourdieu (1974) makes similar assertions with his notion of “habitus” or the “system of durable, transposable dispositions” (p. 74) within which an individual exists. Habitus is a “state of being” generated by a synthesis of discourse and bodily existence: the individual is forever engaged with a variety of discursive meanings or an open system of “dispositions”. Fundamentally, habitus means that discourse only exists when it is embodied by the individual. It has no power until it becomes a part of the human being “enacting” or “living out” its meaning. Therefore, for Bourdieu and Connell, the body is the “dynamic and mutable frontier” (McNay, 2000: 32) between the symbolism of discourse and the materiality of everyday practice. Discourse does not exist without bodies to “live out” its injunctions.

Importantly, as Deidre’s and Nicole’s life histories demonstrate, such a relationship between discourse and practice engenders the potential for negation or transformation of discursive meanings. That is, women’s sex practices do not always replicate discursive meanings. Rather, embodied practice can, as Connell (1987) comments, “be divergent or cyclical… it is not a logical requirement that social reproduction occurs; that is simply a possible empirical outcome” (p. 141). Thus, because sex is an embodied
practice, the ways in which women engage in sex over their lifetime is
dynamic, characterised by moments of transformation or subversion of
hegemonic discourse.

Such transformative moments are evident in Deidre’s life history. The
trajectory of her sexual life is neither uniform nor stable. Her abortion
experience, for instance, represented a major lapse in her pursuit of
“proper” femininity. The experience was pivotal in that it was here that she
became the immoral, sexually deviant woman or “the whore”. Being
constituted as such transformed Deidre’s sense of being and, as she
comments, changed her subsequent sexual experiences. From this point
forward, she set out on a trajectory to fix her former “wrongdoings”. Her
practice discloses a steadfast commitment to the pursuit of becoming
“proper”, even in the face of the difficult circumstances of her marriage.

McNay (2000) contends that the transformative potential of embodied
practice is an inherent part of “habitus”. Embodied practice brings with it
the “moment of praxis” (McNay, 2000: 36) or the moment when the
potentialities inherent in habitus are apparent. In this moment, the
individual can interpret and choose from the dispositions available. It is
this dynamic that McNay (2000) describes in commenting that habitus is
“an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to
experiences and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either
reinforces or modifies its structure” (McNay, 2000: 44, quoting Bourdieu
1974). The moment of praxis, then, is the moment when discursive
meanings can be either reinforced or modified. So, when Deidre chooses to have unprotected sex with her boyfriend, this reproduces the dictates of the discourse of “proper” feminine sexuality. By engaging in sex, she pursues or chooses the disposition that positions her as a valued, adult heterosexual woman.

Interestingly, while Nicole’s sexual life trajectory also reveals a highly unstable and contested pursuit of feminine sexuality, this has not yet resulted in any transformative or pivotal experience in her life, or at least not any that are evident in her narratives. Certainly, Nicole’s narratives demonstrate a life history of embodied sex practice that is highly contentious and difficult, characterised by satisfaction, pride, a sense of equality or, alternatively, regret, guilt and self-loathing. Yet, unlike Deidre, Nicole’s life does not reveal a shifting in her sexual trajectory: the meanings of sex have not changed for Nicole. Nevertheless, the conflict that she experiences and her capacity to reflect on such feelings mean that, potentially, such transformation is in the making for Nicole.

Crucially, both Deidre’s and Nicole’s narratives reveal a strong theme about their own agency in shaping their sexual experiences. Their life histories describe an active engagement with being constituted as “proper” or “equal”. That is, Nicole’s identity as “equal to a man” is not simply bestowed upon her. Rather, through her sex practice, she strives to constitute herself as such: she is a fundamental part in the making of herself as sexually equal. Indeed, this agential capacity arises from
McNay’s (2000) “moment of praxis”. The open system of dispositions engenders moments wherein discursive meanings can be negated and alternatives taken up.

Importantly, Deidre and Nicole provide evidence that sex practice is not the simplistic effect of dominating systems of power-knowledge. Rather, sex practice is generated through a dynamic individual engagement with discursive meanings. That is, sex practice emerges from the interaction of bodies and discourse. It is a product of both the powerful ideologies of the social exterior and the individual’s own bodily practices. Thus, in contrast to the poststructural contention that Deidre and Nicole are “objects of the exercise of power” (Peterson, 1994: 33), here it is evident that Deidre and Nicole are, themselves, generative producers of both sex practices and the discourses of feminine sexuality.

This chapter now continues the analysis of the relationship between the discourses of feminine sexuality and women’s sex practice by exploring the narratives of Elena. While Deidre’s and Nicole’s narratives reveal how bodies are implicated in the engagement of discourse, Elena’s narratives reveal how bodies, in and of themselves, are implicated in the “making” of women’s sex practice. Elena’s narratives are dominated by talk about bodily sensation and physical pleasure and, as a result, reveal a sexual life history that is strikingly different from Deidre’s and Nicole’s. Elena speaks little about “proper” feminine sexuality or of being “like a man”.

Instead, she describes a life in which sexual pleasure is steadfastly pursued.

**Elena: the pursuit of pleasure**

Elena is 63 and retired from a successful real estate career. She is an intelligent woman who talks passionately about her sexual experiences. Elena arrived in Australia from Europe 30 years ago, a move she made after the tragic death of her husband. She has not remarried but has had a number of long-term lovers. Her current relationship is with a married man, Robert, whose wife knows about and, evidently, accepts his sexual relationship with Elena.

Elena’s initiation into the pleasures of sex began early in life. At the age of six, during an afternoon nap, a playmate showed Elena how to touch herself:

Elena: There was this six years old girl who used to sort of like rub herself a little bit. And I didn’t know what she was doing quite, you know? Anytime we were talking about boys, she liked talking about boys, and she always liked sort of looking at my little boyfriends and things like that. And when we were sort of lying in the bed having a nap in the afternoon and she, she, she said that “do you do that?” [gesture referring to touching oneself] So, you know, if you touch yourself [laugh]. I tried it and I thought gosh! [laugh] First, I didn’t think what, didn’t know what she meant but somehow slowly [laugh] I got the idea.

Later, such pleasurable bodily experiences continued, except by this time it was boys who were touching her:
Elena: All those boys, they like teaching me when I was, I don’t know, like ten, twelve how to swim by putting their hand [gestures] holding me in the water. They always seemed to slip [laugh]. That’s why I think it’s so horrific that sort of rape and that child sex, you know, when all those horrible Australian old bastards go to Philippines and they sell them five years old. It’s not just the physical harm, its losing all this, all this long seduction which can be very beautiful you know? All those little kisses and this, you know, fun.

Elena describes her childhood sex play as innocently pleasurable. She is disgusted by the ways in which the sexual fun of children can be destroyed by the predatory sexuality of men. Indeed, Deidre’s experience on the train gives some authority to this. For Elena, such experience with sexual touching and pleasure meant that by the time she was a teenager, she was able to masturbate herself to orgasm.

Importantly, with her reference to the “long seduction”, Elena sees that these early experiences prefigure her later experiences with sex. As Elena understands it, her childhood sex play was part of a slow and comfortable “learning” about sex. Such bodily experiences are reminiscent of what Dowsett (1996) calls “body-erotic potential” (p. 159) or the “autonomous discovery of bodily sensation” (p. 169). In his life history study of gay men, Dowsett (1996) reports how the sexual development of boys is shaped by the exploration of bodily pleasure. The discovery of such pleasure prior to “any discernable formal or informal discursive inscription“ (p.169) means that, by the time injunctions against sensual pleasures are learned, the pursuit of pleasure is already set in motion. Elena’s early discovery of her “body-erotic potential” meant she became captivated by the possibilities of
sexual pleasure. It served as a template for her subsequent sexual experience.

Elena’s first experience with penetrative sex happened when she was seventeen. She describes her first sex partner as unlikeable. They had little in common and, much of the time, he treated her with disrespect. However, by this stage of Elena’s life, she was almost uncontrollably curious about sex. For her, he represented an opportunity to satisfy her long-developing desires:

Elena: I just wanted to have sex full stop [laugh]. I was, I just couldn’t cope with it anymore [laugh]. I was bursting [laugh].

Although on the first occasion Elena did not reach orgasm, she felt a great sense of gratification and achievement. On subsequent occasions she was able to reach orgasm but she never felt entirely satisfied with him. His disrespectful behaviour eventually led to the end of the relationship.

The story of Elena’s first experience with intercourse supports Thompson’s (1990) findings about the role of sexual “foreknowledge” in girls’ experience with first intercourse. As described in Chapter One, Thompson (1990) found that girls who masturbate, who are familiar with their bodies and who feel sexual desire are far more likely to take pleasure in first intercourse than those who are sexually unaware. While Elena’s story certainly supports this, it also demonstrates how such foreknowledge carries forward, shaping subsequent experiences with sex. As the
remainder of Elena’s story demonstrates, the “long seduction” sets the stage for a lifetime of comfort with sex and a pursuit of sexual pleasure.

While Elena’s early twenties were characterised by her passion for sensuous sex, it is important to recognise how the symbolic image of the “proper” woman also shaped her sexual experiences. During this time, Elena certainly pursued sexual pleasure, but did so within the realm of loving and committed relationships:

Elena: I never had really sort of overnight stands. My relationships always sort of lasted a while… I prefer knowing the person and to have some sort of, uh, [p], its, its very hard to explain.

Elena wanted pleasurable sex, but she wanted this within a caring and committed relationship with a man. In a manner reminiscent of Deidre’s experiences as a young woman, Elena had to carefully monitor her desire for sexual pleasure in order to avoid becoming “the whore”.

While Elena enjoyed the relationships she had as a young woman, she was never in love with any of her boyfriends, until she met Radi. Elena was immediately attracted to Radi’s honesty and humour. Unlike her previous relationships, her relationship with Radi did not become sexual until nine months after they met. Instead, they spent time together and, as Elena reports, fell more and more in love. When sex finally did eventuate, Elena describes it as an exceptional experience:

Elena: I don’t even know how it happened but I know that we didn’t get out of bed for about three days [laugh]… We had some nice sort of music after that um that drunken dinner, we were
dancing sort of and the next thing we were on the bed. I don’t think there was much thinking in it at all somehow, yeah… It was just, we were just holding each other all the time and just talking, its funny isn’t it? … it was just the natural continuation of what, you know, what, but I remember, I remember one thing that for the first time in my life I cried, after, after sex, after orgasm. It was just so beautiful [laugh]. I cried! It never happened before.

JB: Why do you think you cried then and not any other time?

Elena: It was love you know [laugh]. It was a different thing.

Elena and Radi married soon after this event. Elena describes their relationship as happy, mutually respectful and playful:

Elena: It was extremely joyous relationship, you know, because he was very intelligent guy and he used to entertain me in bed no end [laugh]. We used to always, he always had to give me good reason for having sex [laugh]. He was running out of occasions [laugh], so he used to ring the uni department to tell him what revolution in South America and things like that. And it, we, somehow, I don’t know, he never, ever took his right to have sex with me for granted. He always somehow, he used to earn it some way, and it had to be fun, you know. Yeah like I remember once, the first time on his birthday when he came with, you know those, those, um, what do you call those bows that you put on parcels? [laugh] You know those ribbons? He just came to the bedroom with just that thing on his penis [laugh]. And he got erection and he couldn’t get it off [laugh]. He was just so funny, you know.

Radi and Elena clearly adored each other. He respected her independence and acknowledged her as an equal. With that, he never “expected” sex. Instead, as Elena describes, he viewed sex with her as a prize, a reward that he needed to work for. Elena describes their sex life as intelligent, playful and joyous. The sexual fun that Elena and Radi had with each other, and the comfort they felt with each other’s bodies, provided the starting points for the exploration of sexual pleasure that
eventuated in their relationship. Elena offers the example of their first experience with anal sex:

Elena: Somehow, sort of like, we were doing it from the back and, you know, he touched me there and it felt sort of like pretty pleasant [laugh].

Here, she describes a spontaneous discovery of sexual pleasure much like that described by Dowsett’s “body-erotic potential”: Radi touched her anus and the pleasure that ensued identified a whole new kind of sexual pleasure. Later in her interview, Elena describes the pleasure of anal sex:

Elena: I sort of always enjoyed, uh, sort of [p], doing it from the back as well you know, sort of because I don’t know, there is something more there involved, yeah, something different… And, I don’t know if you ever had it but its altogether different sort of sensation and the uh, the orgasm is sort of very, very deep.

When Radi touched her anus, Elena experienced an “altogether different sort of sensation”. Elena’s embodied reaction reformulated and transformed her understanding of and approach to sexual pleasure.

Importantly, it seems that it was the quality of Elena and Radi’s relationship that facilitated Elena’s exposure to her “body-erotic potential”. As she described in an earlier narrative, their relationship was “a different thing”. The relationship had deep emotional significance for Elena. Indeed, she cried the first time they had sex. The exploration of sexual pleasure that eventuated in Elena and Radi’s relationship was clearly related to their emotional connection and the trust and mutual respect they held for
each other. It is through the comfort of their relationship that Elena was able to safely explore the possibilities of sexual pleasure.

Tragically, after only two years of marriage, Radi was killed in a car accident. Elena was devastated. They had plans to move to Australia once Radi finished his university training so, after Radi died, Elena decided to go alone.

Elena was 32 years old when Radi died. She knew that finding another relationship like theirs would be difficult but nevertheless she wanted to enjoy a sexual life. It was at this stage of Elena’s life that she began to reconsider her earlier association of sex with love and relationships:

Elena: Until my husband died I always had to have sort of like relationship and really, I would say if not love, like very much a guy to have sex. But when he died I realised that I probably would have to wait a very long time [laugh] and also that I came to Australia. Here it completely sexually liberated me.

The acceptance that Radi was gone and her move to Australia – a place where she felt the sanctions against women’s sexuality were not so repressive - set her on a different path. For Elena, sex was disconnected from love, romance and commitment and she forthrightly pursued it as bodily pleasure.

In the following years of Elena’s life she had many lovers, some long-term and others casual. Instead of asking her about all of these experiences, I asked her to tell me about some of the most and least satisfying. She
started with a story about Michael, a man with whom she had a brief sexual relationship that, upon ending, turned into a close and enduring friendship.

Michael's intelligence and knowledge of art and music attracted Elena. However, she disliked what she saw to be his chauvinistic attitude towards women. Their sexual relationship was brief and ended after a particular incident when they were on holiday together:

Elena: I still remember how it, how it stopped, uh, in London somewhere. Uh, we came to our room in the hotel and he tried to have sex with me, uh, sort, sort of like um, from, you know, behind. And uh I, I was just so unprepared. I wasn’t, I suppose, wet enough. And he couldn’t get in. And he sort of like, you know he wasn’t very happy about it. And I said “Michael, this is, you know, this is not how it’s done”. And, I found him like too direct in his, uh, you know, women are not like that.

Michael's lack of interest in the pleasure of foreplay put an end to Elena’s desire for him. For Michael, sex was about the final product - orgasm – and although Elena also had orgasms during sex with him, this was not enough for her. His “chauvinistic” character made Elena feel like he had little respect for her sexual needs. Indeed, as she comments, he seemed to have little understanding of women’s sexuality. The mutuality, creativity and fun of the sex she had has with Radi was entirely missing with Michael.

One of Elena’s more enjoyable sexual relationships was with Peter, a man who worked for the British intelligence agency. She was attracted to his
intelligence, political knowledge and, of course, his exotic and mysterious occupation. She describes the pleasure of sex with Peter:

Elena: Oh the sex was wonderful, yeah.

JB What was fun about it? What was wonderful about it?

Elena: I don’t know what it was. Its was like [sigh] he just used to get me verbally so sexually aroused that I just practically was getting, was going to rape him if he wasn’t [laugh]

JB So would he talk to you?

E Yes.

JB What kind of things would he say?

E Well, oh just interesting things. Interesting things like, you know, sort of like um, he knew all that old erotic literature and all those practices and things like that.

Peter’s erotic talking fit in well with Elena’s desire for fun and creative sex.

In contrast to her sexual relationship with Michael, sex with Peter began long before intercourse and orgasm. It was a lengthy and sensuous process that allowed them both to explore the intellectual and physical possibilities of sex. Peter understood what “women are like” and respected Elena’s desire for fun and creativity.

Unlike the narratives of Deidre and Nicole, Elena’s narratives are dominated by talk of bodily sensations. For the most part, Elena eschews the “proper girlfriend” or the masculine “sexual citizen”. She understands her sexual experiences as a product of her desire for pleasure. Importantly, however, she does not attribute such desires to a discourse of natural sexuality. Not once during her interview did she allude to sex as biologically derived. Instead, it seems that Elena’s sexuality emerged
through a process of learning and discovery associated with bodily pleasures. Her sexuality emerged through a “long seduction” and the discovery of bodily pleasure.

**The irreducibility of the body in the relationship between discourse and practice**

A life such as Elena’s raises further questions about the role of the body in the relationship between the discourses of feminine sexuality and women’s sex practice. Certainly, as has been demonstrated with Deidre’s and Nicole’s narratives, bodies are implicated in the “making” of sex practices and the transformation of discursive meanings. However, Elena’s narratives demonstrate that bodies, in and of themselves, play a role in the generation of sex practice and the transformation of discursive meanings. Certainly the body “lives through” the edicts of discourse but the symbolic is registered sensually through the body’s capacity for physical sensations such as warmth, softness, pleasure or pain. And while these very sensations are mediated by the symbolic in terms of human meaning, they nevertheless exercise a specific and irreducible impact on human experience. The body plays an autonomous and irreducible role in the generation of sex practice.

Many of Elena’s narratives provide evidence for such an assertion. As a child, when the boys “slip” and touch her while swimming, Elena experiences a pleasurable bodily reaction that shapes her subsequent sexual experiences. She becomes interested in bodily pleasure, uncontrollably curious about the possibilities of sex. Later, when Radi
accidentally touches Elena’s anus during sex, she experiences “an altogether different” kind of pleasure, the discovery of which influences her sex practice. She seeks this different kind of pleasure with Radi and in future relationships. In both instances, it is Elena’s bodily response that shapes her sex practice. In such instances, it is evident that the body and its sensations have social effects (Connell, 1995: 61).

Importantly, such bodily sensations arise precisely because, with sex, the body is commonly the object of practice. Certainly, as Connell (1995) argues, in all practice bodies are both objects and agents. That is, bodies “carry out” practice and are, therefore, agents, yet they are also implicated in the consequences of practice and, as such, are objects. Nevertheless, the agential role of the body in the relationship between sexual discourse and practice provides an elevated potential for the transformation of discursive meanings. Elena alludes to such transformations in her narrative about sex after Radi’s death. Prior to this, notions of the “proper” woman and “the whore” were influential in shaping her understandings of feminine sexuality: good women do not have free and casual sex. Yet, it was Elena’s prior experiences of bodily pleasure that compelled her to reflect upon such restrictions. Her knowledge of bodily pleasure enabled her to question the discursive construction of the “proper” woman and reconstruct her understanding of feminine sexuality in terms of equality, bodily sensation and pleasure.
Dowsett (1996) refers to these transformative moments in the sexual life histories of gay men. He reports that it was in the “doing” of gay sex that heterosexually-identified men experienced emotionally-connected desire for another man. This revealed the possibility of something beyond sex - the possibility of “being” a gay man. As Dowsett (1996) explains, these moments “lifted sex out of the purely physical and deposited [it] into a psychic domain” (p. 159). Elena’s experience with anal sex provides further evidence for such transformations. Yet, for Elena, the processes seem to work in reverse. Elena’s transformative moment involves the discovery of the “purely physical”. Unlike gay men, women’s sex practice is highly structured by discourses of compulsory heterosexuality. The moments when women experience the thrill of bodily pleasure – when Radi touches Elena’s anus – are the moments when new possibilities are revealed. Elena is able to see something beyond the sex that is offered through compulsory heterosexuality. To invert Dowsett’s (1996) description, the construction of sex is lifted out of the emotional or psychic and deposited in the physical.

In sum, unlike the narratives of Deidre and Nicole, Elena’s are dominated by talk of bodily sensation and pleasure. For the most part, for Elena, sex was not about “becoming” the “good” woman or gaining so-called sexual equality. Rather, it involved the achievement of pleasure – first and foremost. Elena’s narratives, then, demonstrate that the body does not simply “carry out” sex practice. It is an irreducible constituent in the “making” of sex practice.
Conclusion

The life histories presented in this chapter illuminate the relationship between the discourses of feminine sexuality described in Chapter Five and women’s sex practices. They reveal how discourse is not mechanically and unilaterally imposed from the social “exterior” but is “worked” by women through practice to make themselves into particular identities: in this case, the “proper” woman or the masculinised “sexual citizen”. What this suggests is that discursive images come into existence only in the moment that women, as agential and reflective beings, engage with them and incorporate them into their sex practice. Secondly, as the life histories of Deidre and Nicole reveal, such practice is unstable, fraught with tension and resistance, and infused with transformative potential that can result in the alteration of discursive meaning. Central to such a relationship is the body. Not only are bodies fundamental to the “living through” of discourse but, as Elena demonstrates, the body has its own specific, agential potential. Thus, although women’s sex practice is powerfully shaped by the symbolic representations of the social world – the “proper” woman and the masculinised “sexual citizen” - these are not totalisingly determinant.
Chapter Seven

The feminine sexual self: A project in time

This chapter addresses the third question that structures this study: the issue of subjectivity and its relationship to sex practice and dominant discourses of sexuality. It presents the life history of Kathleen whose narratives shed light on the way that sexual subjectivity emerges through the actual practice of sex over a lifetime. Like Deidre and Nicole, Kathleen’s narratives reveal how the discourses of feminine sexuality are brought into being through her sex practice and, moreover, how such embodiment of discourse has transformative potential. However, Kathleen’s life history contributes further to these ideas by demonstrating that it is through engaging in sex as embodied practice over time that the sexual self emerges.

Kathleen: “the thing about sleeping with lots of guys is...”

Kathleen’s sexual subjectivity is complex and has changed dynamically throughout her life. Her narratives about being a teenager describe her as
regretful and self-loathing, confused by “proper” feminine sexuality and the
link between love and sex. During this stage of her life, Kathleen sought
affection through sex but was inevitably disappointed and regretful
afterwards, grappling with feelings of immorality and the image of “the
whore”. Yet, Kathleen’s narratives about being a teenager also reveal an
introduction into the bodily sensations of sex much like those described by
Elena. Kathleen’s narratives about her twenties describe a process of
sexual learning through which emerged a less conflicted subjectivity. She
began to differentiate between love and sex and learn about her capacity
for sexual self-determination. The narratives about her marriage describe
a woman who is sexually knowledgeable and confident in her own sexual
desires and pleasures. Yet, a conflicted and frustrated subjectivity persists
because of the circumstances of her marriage where she is unable to fully
express her sexual desires and gain sexual pleasure, constraints she
attributes to her husband’s problematic sexuality.

Importantly, Kathleen’s life history is used here to demonstrate the social
processes through which she developed her sexual subjectivity. She
describes a life of plentiful and varied sexual experiences and, throughout
her interview, she compared these, talking about good and bad sex,
forgettable and unforgettable partners and her own shifting
understandings of her life experience with sex. In this respect, the central
theme of Kathleen’s story is the way in which “sleeping with lots of guys”
permitted her to make comparisons. It was through her extensive
experience with sex as an embodied practice and the resultant
comparisons that, over time, sexual learning took place and her sexual subjectivity emerged.

**Childhood: “bad memories”**

At the time of the interview, Kathleen was 44 and had been married to Andrew for eighteen years. They had two teenage children. Kathleen grew up in an eccentric, well-educated, middle class family. Her grandmother was a famous novelist and her mother, after acquiring a PhD in chemistry, pursued a career in the theatre. Kathleen described a difficult childhood characterised foremost by her parents’ divorce and subsequent re-marriages, each a total of five times. Growing up was difficult with her mother’s alcoholism and mental illness and the family’s occasional homelessness. Kathleen was, much of the time, a confused and desperately unhappy child.

However, Kathleen talks positively and proudly about the free and open atmosphere of sexuality that pervaded the family home. Sex was omnipresent in Kathleen’s home and was viewed as fun and pleasurable:

Kathleen: I remember one time that she [mum] was downstairs banging away [laugh]. And I went and yelled down the stairs “I don’t care what you’re doing but do it quietly!” [laugh] Because I was right upstairs from her. It’s like “oh mum!”

As a child, Kathleen did not experience the same secrecy about sex experienced by other women in the study. Instead, like Elena, she learned early that sex was pleasurable and comfortable. However, the family’s free and open attitude towards sexuality set the stage for what was, for
Kathleen, a highly confusing and contested entry into sexual practice. The memories of her earliest sexual experiences are characterised by confusion, regret and self-loathing:

Kathleen: The first [experiences] were with older guys. [p] I think my father having been gone I was always, at some level, doing father figure stuff. Um, I used to I, I became sexually active when I was fifteen. I sort of had a petting session on a bus between [home city] and [city] with this man. And that was [sigh] unfortunately many of the early ones were kind of sordid, you know. They just, just [p] I was used. And I didn’t really know, I mean, cause I was just looking for affection.

Here, Kathleen links the difficult circumstances of her childhood to her early sexual experiences. She was looking for attention and sought this through sex. However, instead of gaining feelings of love and affection, she felt degraded, exploited and dirty, as she describes here:

Kathleen: It was a way of getting someone to pay attention to me, you know, getting positive feedback. I mean, I also had some good experiences on the bus too [laugh]. I had a couple of good experiences and a couple of bad experiences on the bus. I used to do that, I, just for the next few years.

JB When you were travelling?

K Yeah, I’d just sort of find a good looking guy to sit next to and have a bit of a snog. Yeah, the last one made me stop because I gave him a blow job and that was like “what am I doing? I feel like a whore. I’m not going to do this anymore”.

These confusing experiences on the bus were paralleled by her high school experiences. She describes the social marginalisation and teasing she experienced at school, in particular teasing about her body. Kathleen developed breasts earlier than other girls, making her sexuality a target for teenage boys:
Kathleen: Teenage boys should be just lined up and shot [laugh]. In our high school hallways, and they have like courtyards interspersed, and the guys would stand [p] on the inside of the courtyards facing the hallways and make remarks at the girls who went by. And they were never pleasant, for me anyway. I don’t even remember what they were anymore.

JB You just remember the bad feelings around that?

Kathleen: Yeah yeah. I mean it’s like dread. I mean even after high school it took me a long time to relax when I saw a group of guys, or more than two guys, more than one guy. It took me a long time to sort of say “hang on I’m a grown up now, I don’t have to tense up”.

Kathleen feared boys and their ridicule and, as she acknowledges, this fear continued into her adult life. Kathleen learned that it was men’s prerogative to judge women’s sexuality. They decided if, when and how sex transpired.

However, Kathleen’s childhood experiences with sex were not all negative. She described positively an experience with her first boyfriend in which she first felt sexual desire:

Kathleen: I was fourteen, actually, when we started going out together and we mostly just did kissing and hugging and [p] but he’s where I found out what lust was. We had a goodbye kiss in the hallway that just lit my fire. I was like “holy dooley!” Um, yeah, and that’s where I was, I was like hey this is good stuff and then I went looking for it. He could kiss. He was the beginning of my life long affection for good kissers.

Here, Kathleen’s talk is reminiscent of Elena’s narrative about bodily discovery. She describes an independent discovery of her “body-erotic potential” and acknowledges the way that this event had bearing on her subsequent sexual experiences.
Kathleen’s narratives about her childhood describe a subjectivity that is confused, regretful and self-loathing. She engaged in sex when what she really sought was affection. The hardship, insecurity and loss generated an emotionally needy and attention-seeking self. The sexual freedom, openness and inhibition evident in her family life contradicted the discursive meanings of “proper” feminine sexuality and generated conflicting messages for Kathleen. Sex was viewed as free and uninhibited but engaging in it in this way made her feel like a whore. Such a divided subjectivity was, however, overlaid with knowledge about the pleasurable bodily potentialities of sex. So, while Kathleen felt confused about sex, she knew positive and pleasant aspects of it existed. Such “foreknowledge”, as Thompson (1990: 357) describes it, was important in shaping Kathleen’s subsequent experiences and the emergence of her sexual self.

Kathleen’s narratives begin to elucidate the social process through which her subjectivity emerged. It is through the intersection of sexual discourse, the bodily experience of sex, and the difficult and insecure material circumstances of her life that Kathleen began to learn about how to “do” sex. She gained insight into her own bodily desire and pleasure. She began to learn about men and men’s bodies. She became aware of what constituted so-called “proper” feminine sexuality and learned that certain kinds of sex positioned her as “the whore”.
Such learning is reflected in Dowsett’s (1996: 143) concept of sexual skilling. For Dowsett (1996), sexual skilling involves learning about the “physical possibilities of the body; what hands, mouths, penises and anuses can achieve” (p. 143). It involves learning about the “subtle and nuanced movement of bodies in sexual encounters: … the inviting glance, the suggestive movements of bodies, the first contact, the sequencing of exploring bodies, and so on” (Dowsett, 1996: 144). Certainly, Kathleen’s narratives describe learning about bodily possibilities and how to choreograph sexual encounters. Her kiss in the school hallway and her experiences on the bus would have taught her about how to evoke bodily pleasure and what to do with her hands, mouth and tongue. Elena’s experiences are also testament to such learning. But, importantly, Kathleen’s narratives demonstrate how “sexual learning” extends beyond the physical skills described by Dowsett (1996). For Kathleen, sexual learning involved more than learning about bodies and what to do with them. It involved learning about men and men’s attitudes towards feminine sexuality, as demonstrated with her experiences with teenage boy’s comments. As will be seen in the following narratives, for Kathleen, sexual learning also involved learning about sexual entitlement.

**A young woman: “I’ve had sex with people without knowing why”**

Kathleen had many sex partners during her early twenties. Her stories about some of these experiences mirror the confusion and self-loathing evident in her earlier experiences, as demonstrated in this story about an unintended pregnancy:
Kathleen: When I was 21 I got pregnant to somebody who had been a, had been a [sigh] [p] he was one of the experiences that I’m less proud of because he used to hang around in [landmark] in [city]. I mean, he wasn’t a homeless person but he lived in a one room in the [local derelict area]. Um, he was a step above a homeless person and I just met him at a cafe and went and had sex with him a couple of times. And it was like [p] [sigh]

JB: You didn’t enjoy it?

Kathleen: No I, it was like [p] I’ve had sex with people without knowing why I have sex with people. And he was one of those that I don’t really know why I had sex with.

Evident here is not just Kathleen’s regret about having sex with him but also her confusion about the motivation behind it. She did not think him attractive, the sex itself was unenjoyable, and she had sex with him for no apparent reason. The undercurrent of self-loathing evident in this account is reminiscent of her stories about her earlier adolescent sexual encounters on the bus.

Importantly, though, not all of Kathleen’s experiences during this stage of her life were negative. She spoke proudly about some experiences, describing herself as a sexual conqueror; and she talked reverently about some partners, enjoying the sex because of the emotional connection she had with them. The most revealing stories, however, were those describing experiences that changed her understanding of sex and that transformed her sense of sexual subjectivity. One such narrative describes her recognition that she didn’t have to have sex in order to gain affection:

JB How did you come to this realisation that you could have sex with who you chose to have sex with?
K Partly that I didn’t have to have sex when I wanted affection. You know, when I just wanted some one to sleep with I didn’t actually have to fuck em. Yeah that was a, that was a big deal, that was a big deal.

Kathleen believes that the ability to differentiate between sex and affection was important progress for her. She demonstrates this in her repeated statement of “that was a big deal”. Such “learning” did not happen during one encounter. Rather, it was through a series of experiences over time that she became more discriminating in her choice of sexual partners. She described one such encounter that was particularly transformative:

JB And at what point in your life do you think you realised that you didn’t have to [go all the way if you didn’t want to]?

Kathleen: Well actually it was funny … [I’d] been having a big snogging session with this guy that I had, just a friend you know. I just, I had seen him with his girlfriends, and he treated his girlfriends like shit and he’d always treated me really well. And we were actually in bed. And he had his clothes off and I had half of my clothes off. And I just said “I’m sorry I can’t do this”. And if he’d have said “yes, you can”, I’d had said “OK, [laugh] OK, I guess, yeah” [laugh]. But he was really good about it. I think somehow it gave him more respect for me because I’d said no.

Kathleen was surprised when he conceded to her refusal. Her declaration of “I can’t do this” was precarious: she admits that if he had pushed her to have sex she would have agreed. But he respected her wishes and she recognised, quite unexpectedly, that she had some choice in her sexual encounters. Importantly, as Kathleen suggests, she emerged from this encounter feeling respected. This incident shaped her subsequent experiences and eventually led to Kathleen being able to assert some degree of self-determination:
Kathleen: I wasn’t getting great sex. Most of the time I was just getting, you know, a warm body beside me for the night. And I, I just [p] one guy I said you know “I like you, lets go home together but I don’t want sex tonight”. And he, and he said “OK”. And I did it with two or three guys and so I was like “hey this works!” [laugh]

After the first experience, Kathleen was inclined to again exercise her right to refuse sex and when other men conceded, her confidence grew.

Kathleen learned that she was not obliged to have sex and, in fact, not all men expected sex. These narratives describe how Kathleen learned not only about her own capacity to exercise sexual self-determination but also about the potential of men to recognise her needs and respond to them.

Importantly, these transformative encounters were pre-conditioned by the quality of the relationship that Kathleen had with some of her sex partners. It was because Kathleen’s sex partners respected her autonomy that she was able to exercise some control over the experience and sexual learning ensued. The importance of relationships in this respect was also demonstrated in Elena’s life history in her relationship with Radi. This issue is more fully explored in the following chapter when Judith’s sexual relationship is explored and compared to both Elena’s and Kathleen’s.

During her early twenties, Kathleen’s subjectivity was characterised by the same confusion and division that characterised her adolescent years. Through sex Kathleen sought affection and love but was inevitably disappointed. She experienced confusion about her sexual choices and self-loathing for being “the whore”. Importantly, however, Kathleen gained
some degree of integration during this part of her life. The severe conflict evident during her teens was increasingly resolved through the sexual learning she experienced in her twenties. She became more cognizant of her motivations for engaging in sex and better able to shape the way sex transpired. Such learning engendered a less conflicted subjectivity.

As Kathleen states time and again in her talk, this learning emerged in the contrast between good and bad experiences:

Kathleen: The thing about sleeping with lots of guys is that often times it is not memorable. You know, you just have in and out and in and out. So [p] uh, if any were outstanding then that makes it memorable, even if they’re really still lovers if you just had a better than average time or they did something, one of them just talked and talked and talked and talked [laugh].

Kathleen was able to reflect upon, identify and articulate what was good sex and what was not. This was facilitated by her broad sexual experiences, with different partners and under varying circumstances. Through “sleeping with lots of guys” she gained awareness of her bodily sensations, her right to sexual self-determination and the capacity of men to be caring, respectful and sharing sex partners. Indeed, “sleeping with lots of guys” provided Kathleen with an experiential basis for developing some degree of coherency in her subjectivity.

**Marriage: “a good husband and father”**

When Kathleen was 26 she met her husband Andrew. Their relationship was and still is characterised by a strong attachment to each other and an
enduring companionship. However, the marriage is beset by difficult and frustrating sex:

**Kathleen:** I consider myself to be very lucky that I didn’t marry anybody until he came along, because [p] there wasn’t anybody that I had been sleeping with up to that time that would have made a good a husband and a father as he has. Yeah, unfortunately he’s really boring in bed [laugh]. Unfortunately. [sigh] Um, and I don’t know if it’s me, you know, because he’s, he’s attentive and he’s considerate. He’s had premature ejaculation and always has, which [sigh] which I haven’t tried as hard as I might have to help overcome and because I, I don’t like to kiss him. Some time during the pregnancies I just stopped wanting to kiss him and it’s never really come back. I don’t like the way he kisses. So I don’t know what my problem was, why I have a problem now when I didn’t before but it’s pretty much ingrained and I do every so often try to overcome it but its like [shrug].

Kathleen’s dislike of sex with Andrew goes deeper than his difficulties with premature ejaculation and kissing:

**Kathleen:** I’ve never felt real passion for my husband. I’ve always loved him and liked him [p] but I’ve never, you know ... he feels passionate about me and I don’t feel passionate about him so it’s like, oh, I’m sorry.

Sex with Andrew evokes all sorts of negative feelings for Kathleen. She is frustrated by the quality of sex but is unsure about how to make it better. She feels that perhaps the problem lies with her and not Andrew and blames herself for not wanting to kiss him. Moreover, she feels guilty for not trying harder to remedy their problems. She is deeply conflicted by the way that she loves and reveres her husband but at the same time dislikes kissing him or having sex with him.
Kathleen and Andrew have tried many things to try and improve sex:

Kathleen: We’ve tried the, like the delayed, pinch, pinching the penis, which never really worked very well. And if you pinched it and then he came, he came while you pinched it and then you’re like OK well that one’s wasted [laugh]. Um, yeah, we tried, we sort of tried all of the what they tell you to do, you know read books about things to do. Now we just, we have sex about once a week, which I think is pretty good. We’ve been married for eighteen years. Saturday night sex, sometimes it’s other nights, you know.

Interestingly, their difficulties with sex have not stopped them from having regular sex, which, possibly, is testament to the commitment they have towards one another. However, despite their repeated efforts, Kathleen continues to feel guilty, blaming herself for not trying harder:

Kathleen: I feel bad. I feel guilty for not trying harder to, to do something. I mean he even went to those clinics and got those shots but we really learned that, that was alright but just poking a needle into your dick is just not, not a sexy thing [laugh]

JB I can’t imagine it is! So, its something that you’ve communicated about then, the premature ejaculation problem?

Kathleen: Hmm [agree], I actually mentioned Viagra lately, a couple of times but he’s resisting. He’s afraid of the side effects, which, you know, as you are.

Kathleen’s comments about Andrew disclose a self that is loving, nurturing and committed to her husband. She respects and admires him and very much wants to resolve their sexual problems. Unfortunately, she feels her attempts have been either not good enough or unsuccessful and it is from this that her guilt derives.
The loving, committed and sexually nurturing aspect of Kathleen’s subjectivity is reminiscent of Ussher’s (1997a) discussion of the heterosexual romantic dream (p. 446). Kathleen’s talk reflects the idea that the “right” relationship involves not only love and commitment but also overwhelming passion and sexual satisfaction. If such passion is not present in the relationship then it is simply through adequate care and nurturing that gratifying sex will eventuate. Thus, as a “proper” wife, Kathleen attempts to nurture Andrew and resolve their sexual shortcomings. When her efforts are unsuccessful she becomes frustrated and blames herself for not trying hard enough.

The strongest feature of Kathleen’s subjectivity is conflict and frustration. The “foreknowledge” she has about the pleasurable potential of sex conflicts with the capacity to explore such potentials with Andrew. She knows about her body-erotic potential but her efforts to explore it are thwarted by Andrew’s difficulties with premature ejaculation and her own bodily aversion to him. This conflict and frustration is better understood by analysing Kathleen’s narratives about her infidelity and bodily pleasure.

**Infidelity: “the best sex I ever had”**

After seven years of marriage, Kathleen had a sexual affair with a co-worker, the memories of which she still recalls with pleasure:

Kathleen: For all the shit that happened afterwards, I do not regret that one. Best sex I ever had. Best sex I have ever [emphasis] had.
It was during this affair that Kathleen was able to fully explore her body’s potential for sexual pleasure:

Kathleen: I found out what it was really all about. You know, “oh what this is what good sex is!” Because I had had lots of ordinary sex and I just think in my twenties I wasn’t, my body wasn’t, I’d started off on the wrong foot. I think if I’d been fifteen, sixteen and actually gotten a good, healthy long term kind of relationship, I’d have got it. But I got, because I had so much bad sex it sort of got mixed up in so many other bad things that I didn’t really get it imprinted on me what good sex was, what good sex felt like, until my thirties and then I just went oooohhh! I mean orgasms. I never had orgasms in my twenties and when I did they were these little piddly things and in my thirties it’s like wow!

Kathleen describes how the sexual affair taught her the “feeling” of good sex, and of how she gained full awareness of what sexual pleasure meant to her. She liked a “masterful” lover and the feeling of being penetrated:

Kathleen: I mean fingers and tongues are nice but for me they’re just an accompaniment to the main course… I just like the feeling of the in and out.

It was during this affair that Kathleen was able to fully explore the nature of her sexual desire, something she describes as “wild eyed lust”. Her sexual learning was overwhelmingly physical. She emerged from this experience with a confidence about her body and a comprehensive understanding of her own sexual likes and dislikes.

Kathleen ended her affair when Andrew found out about it. Despite his deep hurt, they remained committed to their marriage and their children but the healing process was difficult:
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Kathleen: Oh it was just awful. We had a year of hell. And I mean just a year of hell. I don't, I don't know how we survived it. I mean we had counsellors and we talked and we didn't talk and we cried and we didn't have sex and it was just [p] a very bad year.

This narrative demonstrates not only the struggle that Kathleen and Andrew endured but also their commitment to each other and to the survival of their marriage. They sought professional help; they communicated and expressed their emotions and they survived. However, Kathleen’s memories of “the best sex” remained with her and, despite her commitment to her marriage and love for Andrew, she has been unable to stay faithful to him. Her most recent affair occurred several weeks before my interview with her and left her with renewed longings for the “feeling of good sex”:

Kathleen: I shouldn't have done that because it just made me realise what I was missing. Really bad. I mean it was really like “oh, Jesus, why did I do that?” I don’t regret the experience but I regret the longings. You know, if I want to stay with my husband, I have got to knock it on the head. You know, because he doesn’t, he doesn’t kiss well and our sex life isn’t that good and the first time afterwards it was like “oh my god!” You know, I mean comparisons are odious and I’m really trying not to but it’s really hard not to when you’ve had this great sex before and then you’re having really ordinary sex.

This narrative captures Kathleen’s deep conflict and frustration. She wants to be a good wife but also needs to explore her potential for sexual pleasure. However, her life circumstances preclude her access to both: choosing to be the “proper” wife means forsaking her own bodily desires and pleasures and, likewise, choosing bodily pleasure means giving up her marriage. It is from such conflict that her frustration emerges.
Importantly, then, the conflict evident in Kathleen’s subjectivity is different than the conflict that constituted her younger sexual self. As a younger woman, her conflicted self was rooted in the inability to separate sex from affection. She had little understanding of her own motivations, sexual choices and decisions and her own bodily desires and pleasures. As a 44 year old woman, however, Kathleen can clearly articulate what motivates her sexually. She is confident about what sort of sex she likes and tries to reproduce it with her husband. In this sense, Kathleen’s sexual self has a much greater degree of integration than her younger self. She is knowledgeable about her body and her sexual desires. Nevertheless, deep division persists through the frustration engendered by her inability to explore and express herself sexually within her marriage.

Kathleen’s life story demonstrates how the processes explored in the previous chapter work to generate her understanding of herself as a sexual being. For Kathleen, it was by engaging in sex as an embodied practice through her life time, with its built-in capacity for transformative moments and sexual learning, that she became “sexually skilled”, gaining a knowledgeable but deeply conflicted subjectivity.

**Time engenders the self: The emergence of the sexual self through embodied sex practice over time**

Kathleen’s life story demonstrates that the emergence of sexual subjectivity is a *project in time* (Sartre, 1967). She talked about her life as
a trajectory, linking her earlier sexual experiences with later ones, reflecting on how certain encounters, experiences or people – the kiss in the school hallway, the capacity for sexual self-determination, the “feeling of good sex” - shaped the way that she engaged in subsequent sexual experiences. The remainder of this chapter will explore how it is through embodied sex practice over time that sexual learning takes place and the sexual self emerges.

Kathleen’s narratives provide further authority to the processes explored in Chapter Six. Like Deidre and Nicole, Kathleen’s life story demonstrates how sex is an embodied practice through which images of feminine sexuality are incorporated, interpreted and given meaning. That is, Kathleen brings the meanings of discourse into being through her sex practice and, in this way, she is an agent in the “making” of her sex experiences. Such a process is demonstrated in her stories about sex with Andrew that involve her becoming the “good wife” through sexual nurturing, trying new things, and being committed to her marriage.

Moreover, as Deidre and Nicole also demonstrated, embodiment brings with it a certain degree of agency in which the “moment of praxis” allows choice from which transformative experiences can ensue. Kathleen’s first experience of saying “no” to sex represents such a pivotal moment in which a new range of sexual possibilities were revealed, namely the potential to not have sex.
Kathleen’s narratives also evoke Elena’s narratives about the irreducibility of the body in the development of sexual practice and identity. Kathleen’s talk about the discovery of her “body-erotic potential” demonstrates how bodies, in and of themselves, play a role in the generation of sex practice. Certainly, for Kathleen, experiencing the “feeling of good sex” shaped her understandings of sex and her subsequent sex practice. As a teenager, such “body-erotic potential” shaped her search for good kissers; as an adult, she succumbed to infidelity in her marriage. Thus, as Elena previously demonstrated, the body plays an autonomous and irreducible role in the generation of sex practice.

Kathleen’s narratives clearly support the proposition that sex is an embodied practice generated through the complex relations between discursive imagery and the corporeality of bodies. However, what Kathleen’s life story adds to such a framework is the way that embodied sex practice generates the sexual self. Evident in Kathleen’s life history is the way in which her subjectivity is generated through the actual “doing” of sex. Dowsett (1996) partially captures such a process when he proposes that “the shaping of sexual identity by the experiences of sex itself is a major constitutive element of [sexual] being” (p. 106). Yet, what Dowsett (1996) does not emphasise is the crucial point that the emergence of the self through “doing” is possible only because sex is an embodied practice. Lois McNay (2000) addresses this in her analysis of subjectivity based on the ideas of Bourdieu (1974). For McNay (2000), it is only because practice is embodied that the individual is accorded agency in the “making”
of their own sex practice. This agency is critical because it means that subjectivity is not simply omnipotently determined by disciplinary power, as a Foucauldian approach would suggest. Rather, the self is agential in the making of its own subjectivity. Thus, Kathleen’s sexual subjectivity emerges in the “doing” of sex precisely because sex is an embodied practice.

Crucially, however, this happens through time and years of varied sexual experience. Such a process is revealed in Kathleen’s repeated reference to her “good” and “bad” sexual experiences and how learning emerged from the contrast between the two. For instance, the “physical discovery” Kathleen experienced in her sexual affair – the desire to be penetrated, the “feeling” of a masterful lover - could not have occurred in the absence of her previous experiences with her husband and the sensation of “bad” sex. As Kathleen herself attests, she was only able to understand her desire for penetration because of her previous experiences with her husband in which penetration was rare.

While it is evident that Kathleen’s subjectivity emerged through the practice of sex, an integral feature of this is the passage of time. As McNay (2000) proposes, in quoting Pierre Bourdieu, “practice generates time: ‘time is engendered in the actualisation of the act’” (p. 40). Thus, when Kathleen repeatedly emphasises the importance of being able to compare good and bad experiences, she is in fact revealing the importance of time in the development of her subjectivity. She is
demonstrating that subjectivity is not a collection of disjointed, incommensurable subject positions - “proper” wife, sexual conqueror, pleasure-seeking and so forth – that are momentarily generated and then vanish as the next discursive construction occurs. Instead, each moment of subjectification is predicated on the previous moment and constitutive of the subsequent moment. Her life experiences are not disparate and free-floating in time. Rather, they operate collectively through time to generate her subjectivity.

Clearly, then, Kathleen’s life story evokes the Sartrean idea of sexual subjectivity as a “project” with sources and consequences. But, importantly, her story also permits insight into how the self gains a sense of integration or coherency. Indeed, as demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, theorists debate the existence of a coherent self. The Cartesian approach asserts a unitary, presocial and self-contained subjectivity that is not only coherent but autonomous and unique to each individual. Foucault (1973, 1973, 1976, 1977) and other poststructuralists argue against the existence of a unitary, coherent self, instead proposing a collection of insecure and fractured subject positions. For Foucault, self-reflexivity is a social myth. Kathleen’s life story, however, suggests neither of these propositions. Rather, it demonstrates what McNay (2000) describes as a “dynamic unity” rooted in embodiment. According to McNay (2000), embodiment means that the self is not unitary, as Descartes suggests, nor is it multiple, as proposed by Foucault. Rather, it occupies a middle ground where it has “unity but it is the dynamic unity of change through time”
(McNay, 2000: 27). Thus, the self is a corporeal, self-reflexive substance upon which is enacted multiple, contradictory and regulatory social forces.

For McNay (2000), in borrowing from Ricoeur, the self gains a sense of unity through the act of narration. That is, a coherent subjectivity emerges through the act of “talking about” life experiences, making sense and integrating the meaning of experiences through narrative. Importantly, the variable and contradictory experiences of life mean that complete unity can never be achieved and, thus, the self is “neither completely in flux nor static” (McNay, 2000: 89). Yet, Kathleen’s story suggests that coherency is not achieved simply through the act of narration alone. The degree of integration that Kathleen gained through her sexual life experiences did not exclusively arise from “talking about” her sexual experiences. Kathleen’s life story suggests that integration of the sexual self derives from a complex combination of sexual practice, the associated potential for transformative moments and learning, and her own reflexivity.

This is not to say that “talking about” sex is not involved in the achievement of self-coherence. Certainly, it was evident in my interviews that talking about sex incited reflexivity and encouraged the assembly of a coherent selfhood. I saw multiple examples of “revelation” during interviews where women would stop part way through a story and comment that they were suddenly seeing their experiences in a new light. Kathleen’s stories suggest that it is in the practice of, and narration about, sex that coherency emerges.
Conclusion

Kathleen’s sexual life history demonstrates that sex is an embodied practice. Importantly, it is the transformative potential of embodied sex practice that engenders “sexual learning” and it is from such learning that the self emerges. Moreover, as Kathleen demonstrates, the self gains coherency through sexual learning. It was through extensive and varied experiences of embodied sex practice that Kathleen’s sexual learning occurred and a sexual selfhood emerged. Crucial to this process was how her subjectivity was and is a *project in time*. For Kathleen, each sexual experience was predicated on previous experiences and constitutive of subsequent ones.

It is clear from Kathleen’s life history that the sexual self is not totalisingly determined by the social world. That is, while dominant symbolic representations of feminine sexuality are powerful constituents of Kathleen’s sexual subjectivity, it is not reduced to them. She is agential in her sexual experiences and sense of self. Such process is reflected in McNay’s (2000) comment that subjectivity emerges from the “lived relation between embodied potentiality and material relations” (p. 16).

The final two chapters return to the relationship between women’s sexual subjectivity and social relations. While Deidre, Nicole and Kathleen demonstrate that discourses of feminine sexuality are powerful in shaping subjectivity, the life histories of Judith, Katy and Lisa examined in the
following two chapters reveal the way in which the social circumstances of a woman’s life mediate the deployment of such discourses and the process through which sexual subjectivity emerges.
Chapter Eight

The role of men’s and women’s relationships in the making of subjectivity

This chapter, like the previous chapter, is concerned with the study’s third research question. It explores the relationship between women’s sex practice and sexual subjectivity. The focus of this chapter, however, is the role of women’s relationships with their male partners in shaping the production of sexual subjectivity.

Judith: “he’s very Victorian in his attitude”

My interview with Judith was dominated by talk about the difficulties of her marital relationship. This was evident in her response to my question in which I asked her about her reasons for participating in the study:

Judith: I thought “hmmm this could be interesting, somebody might listen to me [emphasis], what I think and feel”. And I have, I’ve only got one husband, one partner, and I, I've always felt that he doesn’t really listen.

At the time of my interview with her, Judith had been married to Gerald for 32 years. She felt their relationship was uncommunicative and
passionless. Her experiences with sex had been limited to their marriage. Throughout the interview she referred to her sexual experiences mainly in terms of her relationship to Gerald and, in contrast to Kathleen, talked very little about the physical sensations or the passionate and transcendent possibilities of sex. Judith’s narratives reveal a life that has been powerfully shaped by the hierarchal notions of gender that shore up her marriage. While her story is often negative, her narratives powerfully illustrate how women’s relationships with their male partners are significant in shaping the “kind” of discourses of feminine sexuality available to them, their capacity and opportunity for sexual learning and the kind of subjectivity they thus gain. Indeed, the negativity of Judith’s story provides contrast to the positive relationships described by women like Elena. This contrast will be elucidated in the following discussion, affording further understanding to the way that relationships shape sexual subjectivity.

Judith was 52 at the time of the interview. Although she had worked outside of the home on occasion, most of her married life to Gerald had been spent caring for their two children and looking after the family home. A significant formative aspect of Judith’s life was growing up in a Catholic family. She described the dominance of religion in her childhood:

Judith: We would never miss mass because if you missed mass you could be struck and die with a mortal sin on your soul, go straight to hell. And, yeah, it was all pretty terrifying stuff when you think back about it now. It was all built on fear, I felt, the Catholic religion. And there wasn’t a whole lot of love there. But my parents were very religious and, uh, [p] yes, and they passed all that on. They didn’t talk about it very much at home, you just knew. We went to Catholic schools and basically and um and we lived in a Catholic home. And,
um, yeah, it was all there, all around you: statues and pictures and going to mass and fasting before you have Holy Communion and all the holy saints’ days.

Judith’s childhood was highly regimented by the regulations and rituals of Catholicism. As she suggests, Catholicism wasn’t just one identifiable part of her life. It was all-encompassing, shaping every aspect of her behaviour, beliefs and subjectivity. The presence of religion was an unquestioned and omnipotent force in Judith’s family and importantly, as she points out, it was fuelled by fear and guilt. She felt it was impossible to meet the strict standards of behaviour instituted by the Catholic Church. She constantly struggled against being the failure, reprobate or sinner.

Judith’s acceptance of Catholic regulation was not absolute. As a child she rebelled against the repression and occasional cruelty of Catholic school. She disliked the nuns and their use of fear and corporal punishment. When she was ten, she decided she had had enough of Catholic school and, without her mother’s knowledge or consent, enrolled herself in the local state school. When questioned by the local Catholic authorities, she refused to return and attempted to persuade her siblings to do the same:

Judith: When we got home the local priest was in the lounge room and, um, wanted to know why we had left. And I just told him, and I told the others, younger ones, to say “no, you’re not going back”. But, anyway, I never went back but the two younger ones did.

Judith had a tenacity and independence that enabled her to occasionally question the strict conventions of Catholic life. Indeed, Judith’s
independence shaped many experiences in her life and, as will be demonstrated, was formative of the quality of her relationship with Gerald.

Crucially, the Catholic Church held particularly repressive views on sexuality. Judith’s early experiences with her sexuality were shaped by a view of sexual desire and pleasure as wicked and immoral. In particular, it was women’s sexuality that was most susceptible to transgression. Judith’s first relationship with a man started when she was eighteen. It lasted for three years but never became sexual because of her beliefs about pre-marital sex. She feared pregnancy and had no knowledge of or access to contraception.

When Judith was 21, she met Gerald. It was not until they married that Judith felt comfortable having sex with him. For her, abstaining from pre-marital sex derived from fears about being a sinner, as she suggests in a narrative about practising the rhythm method:

Judith: We just practised around [the rhythm method] and, if we did fall [pregnant], well, I was a married woman so it didn’t [laugh] it wasn’t going to be a big sin.

Here, she makes a link between pregnancy, marriage and sin that evokes her understanding of pre-marital sex as transgression. For Judith, as a young, unmarried woman, it was the fear of pregnancy that determined her sex practice. She pursued a valued femininity by abstaining from sex.
Matthews (1984) provides insight into what she calls the pursuit of “Catholic femininity” (p. 137). She describes how Catholic femininity “held an extra and precise dimension of standards to be lived up to” (Matthews, 1984: 136). The severe restrictions on women’s sexuality meant that women tried to gain a valued Catholic femininity but when they inevitably failed “were likely to suffer additional guilt over transgressions” (Matthews, 1984: 136). Judith was, for the most part, successful in her pursuit of Catholic femininity. Fear facilitated her avoidance of premarital intercourse and her achievement of Catholic femininity. But this came at the cost of an almost complete annihilation of herself as an active, desiring sexual being.

Judith’s talk about her first meeting with Gerald has an undeniably dispassionate feel. In the interview, she had difficulty describing what she found attractive about him and she portrayed herself as a passive participant in the courtship and marriage process. Indeed, her narratives suggest that marriage was something that simply happened to her. The marriage itself began on a decidedly negative footing, as demonstrated in Judith’s story about their wedding night:

JB So the first time you had penetrative sex was when you got married?

Judith: Yep.

JB And what was that experience like?

Judith: Not very nice at all. No, not very nice.

JB What was dislikeable about it?

Judith: Um, it hurt. It hurt and my husband wasn’t very understanding or anything. Um, yeah, and I suppose
mentally I wasn’t really feeling that passionate so I don’t think, um, yeah, I was probably just tense due to that it hurt.

JB Ok, what were you tense about? Were you a bit scared about what was going to happen?

Judith: Uh? Yeah, it did hurt. Maybe I wasn’t aroused enough or something and he was just maybe thinking more about what he was going to get out of it….

JB So when you say he wasn’t very understanding, what do you mean? In what ways was he not understanding?

Judith: Oh well I wasn’t doing it right [chuckle].

JB Oh, this was something he said to you?

Judith: Yeah. I remember it being, on the honeymoon being in the toilet crying because um, feeling so upset that um he wasn’t happy with what I was doing. I mean, I hadn’t done it before so I was only learning.

JB So this is something that he talked about with you?

Judith: Oh yes. He made it, made me aware that it wasn’t real good or I wasn’t, um, participating enough or something to that extent yeah.

JB What was it that you weren’t doing right according to him?

Judith: I don’t, I’m not real sure, but um [p] yeah

JB Oh, that’s not good.

Judith: No, no.

JB So this is why it was not a nice experience, because he was saying that you weren’t doing it properly?

Judith: Yeah, yeah, “what’s the matter?” or “just relax” or something like that. I mean when someone’s hurting you its pretty hard to relax. He probably was no master himself.

Judith’s memories of this first experience construct Gerald as selfish and focussed on his own sexual pleasure. He blamed Judith because he was not enjoying sex. It seems that, to Gerald, it was Judith’s responsibility to ensure sex was pleasurable. For Judith, the experience was so awful that
she cried in the bathroom. He failed to recognise her physical pain, her fear of sex, and her need for emotional care and respect. Yet, in addition to this, he was also disparaging and critical of her. Through this experience Judith learned that sex was not only fearful but could be physically painful and emotionally belittling. Interestingly, however, Judith ends her narrative with a short statement of resistance to Gerald’s construction of her as sexually inadequate. By implying that Gerald himself was “probably no master”, Judith defiantly turns the critical gaze onto him and scrutinises his sexual competence. She shows resistance and independence in the face of her husband’s construction of her as submissive and inadequate.

Gerald’s belief that it was Judith’s role to provide him with sexual pleasure was, most of the time, shared by Judith herself. To Judith, the sex on their wedding night was a part of her role as his wife:

J: Did it have any meaning in terms of your relationship with your husband?

J: Um? [p] Oh, well, you know, I was his wife and he was my husband and that was the next step. It wasn’t, the ground didn’t move or anything [laugh].

Unlike many other women in the study, Judith did not associate meanings of emotional connection, love and devotion with her first experience of intercourse. Instead, it was simply a part of marriage: her role as Gerald’s wife required that she have sex with him.
Later in their marriage, Judith was able to achieve orgasm during sex. Yet, the problems in their relationship meant that sex continued to be fraught with tension and ill feelings:

Judith: He’s a difficult character to live with. And, um, [p] and he can tell you this and that “don’t do this, don’t do that”. And you have a disagreement about a lot of things and I don’t agree with what he’s said. And then by the time you get into bed, well, I’m pretty annoyed with you. And he just thinks “oh well, we’ll have sex now”. And I’m thinking “hang on buddy, I’m not in the mood”. He’s turned all my buttons off. So, so, to me, if I couldn’t connect to him mentally well I wasn’t going to connect with him physically. Like, he had just turned me right off.

Gerald’s authoritarian and inflexible personality left little room for Judith to express her opinions. His lack of respect for her meant that sex was always difficult.

After several years of marriage, Gerald had an affair. Judith was extremely hurt and partially blames herself for his infidelity:

Judith: He ended up having an affair with somebody which wounded me dreadfully. This was after he had the vasectomy. And, um, and then there was another incident some years later. So twice he has put me through absolute hell when he, well, I thought we had an OK sex life.

Judith: He always said it was my fault so he never acknowledged that it was his fault or was never sorry or anything.

JB And how was it your fault?

Judith: Yeah, I’m not real sure about that one. It was my fault: I’m at home minding the children while he’s having a night out with some mates and it’s my fault. So that was a bit of a, a bitter pill to swallow for me.
Gerald justified the affair by claiming that Judith was unable to satisfy him sexually. She partially concedes to this viewpoint when she links his infidelity with the quality of their sexual relationship. Judith accepts Gerald’s view of her as a sexual failure.

Judith and Gerald’s relationship is characterised by strict gender roles. Gerald earns the family income and authoritatively makes decisions. He is emotionally unaccountable and entitled to unrestricted access to Judith’s body. As his wife, Judith is subservient to Gerald’s wishes, looks after the home and children, and submits her body to him on demand. Judith feels that their relationship is based on Gerald’s prejudiced attitude towards, and concomitant fear of, women:

Judith: He’s very Victorian in his attitude. He thinks women should be at home, here I am [gesturing to herself]. And he doesn’t think they should have too many, my husband is also German, so I think that also sort of exacerbates his, um, his views on a lot of things. Um, yeah, they can sort of have very, very different ideas about different things as well. So he sort of thinks, yes, that women should this and men should that. And, um, I’m not always prepared to fight for everything I suppose because um you get sick of fighting for everything. I think some things are just you’re god given right. And, um, and you don’t have to keep fighting for them and I’m not prepared to be at loggerheads over every little thing all the time. But sometimes I do.

According to Judith, Gerald believes men and women have particular roles and, importantly, women’s roles are subservient. He disapproves of women who do not concede to his masculine authority. Whenever Judith expresses a contradictory opinion, a conflict ensues. Indeed, the tension and hostility of their relationship stems from Judith’s desire to express her
assertiveness and independence in the face of Gerald’s inflexibility. Yet, Gerald consistently denies Judith’s autonomy. To him, she is only a valued woman when she complies with her role as “wife”, is acquiescent and sexually accommodating. Matthews (1984) describes such a relationship when she comments:

as the wife of a hard and jealous man, her every act of independence was an insult to his masculinity. His standard of femininity entailed her total passivity and subservience to his will, …her time absolutely at his disposal and her work at his direction. (p. 146)

Yet, not only was Judith’s time and work ruled by Gerald but her sexuality existed for his pleasure. Judith’s understanding of herself as a sexual being is defined entirely through her role as Gerald’s wife. So, while she demonstrates resistance in her relationship, she is also acquiescent, passive, non-desiring, and obliging.

Judith had few of the opportunities for sexual learning that characterised Kathleen’s life. Her Catholicism meant she did not have access to the more liberal understandings of feminine sexuality available to Kathleen. Her commitment to Catholic femininity was then sustained through the rigidly gendered nature of her marriage. Gerald’s persistent construction of her as inadequate and subservient upheld her passive, asexual feminine sexuality. Given such restrictive circumstances, Judith’s capacity for sexual learning was limited. The discovery of bodily pleasures, learning about the possibilities of men’s and women’s relationships, and her own capacity to exercise sexual rights were restrained and, as such, her subjectivity remained non-desiring and sexually obliging.
Mediation of the sexual self through relationships

Like other women in the study, Judith gained a sense of self through her sex practice. She “became” the proper Catholic woman by, first, abstaining from premarital sex, and then, once married, taking responsibility for her husband’s sexual satisfaction. What is of importance here, however, is the way that Judith’s subjectivity as the “proper” Catholic woman was sustained through the strict gender hierarchy of her relationship with Gerald. His sexist views produced material conditions that served to perpetuate her subjectivity as passive and obliging. Judith had no access to extensive and varying sex experience and, consequently, her sexual learning took place within her experiences of being Gerald’s wife and his continual denigration of her as such.

Judith’s sexual subjectivity is upheld by the material conditions that characterise her life. She is economically dependent on Gerald. She has little training and few skills meaning that if she wishes to maintain her current standard of living she has little choice but to remain married. Moreover, Judith has had little capacity to make life decisions for herself, to exercise her independence and autonomy. Her role as Gerald’s wife has demanded her constant capitulation to his wishes and demands. Such inequality, then, is not simply symbolic. It emerges from the gendered power relations played out in Judith’s and Gerald’s relationship. Judith upholds her femininity through her marriage to a man who “pays the bills”. Gerald maintains his masculinity by ensuring that Judith submits her
labour, autonomy and sexuality to him. As Judith reports, her efforts to exercise autonomy – for instance, by expressing a contradictory opinion - results in conflict. Her expression of autonomy undermines Gerald’s masculinity. Any acknowledgement of her autonomy challenges his very being. Thus, Judith is required to continually submit in order to preserve a sense of self for both.

Within such restrictive circumstances, sex for Judith remains a part of her pursuit of Catholic femininity. She pursues the only “kind” of valued femininity that is safely available to her. Such circumstances leave little opportunity for sexual learning and exploring her “body-erotic potential”. Thus, Judith’s capacity to develop a sexual self that exists outside of the discourse of “proper” Catholic femininity is materially restricted.

Other women in this study demonstrate that the hierarchical ordering that constitutes Judith’s and Gerald’s relationship is not an inevitable part of heterosexual relationships. Elena talks of a highly communicative, adoring, devoted, and mutually respectful relationship with Radi. For them, there was no sense of sexual ownership or obligation. Radi did not claim rights over her body and sexuality. Instead, as Elena described, Radi viewed sex with her as a prize, something he had to earn. Other women, like Johanna and Teresa, also talked about these qualities in their relationships with men.
Such relationships are reminiscent of the ideas behind the “democratisation of sexual relations” outlined in Chapter Five. Here, Weeks (1998), Connell (1995), Ryan (2000) and others describe how sexual freedom and equality can be achieved through relationships that are based on love, openness, mutual trust and personal choice. Sex becomes a matter of attraction and desire rather than duty and obligation. Indeed, Ryan (2000) argues that the idea of “mutual recognition” inherent in the “democratisation of sexual relations” is the most promising source of heterosexual women’s sexual freedom. She asserts that mutual recognition is “linked to feelings of trust and security in our partners. It is a desire to be recognised for who we really are. This recognition cannot exist outside being connected to… men” (Ryan, 2000: 103). Importantly, Ryan (2000) recognises that attaining mutual recognition is dependent on the kind of relationship a woman has with her male partner. It is only when a woman’s partner recognises, accepts and supports her desire for sexual pleasure or self-determination that such desires are brought into being.

The narratives of some respondents demonstrate how such democratic mutuality is played out in a praxeological sense to shape the kind of sexual learning they experience and the kind of subjectivity that emerges. Elena’s desire for anal sex, for instance, only comes to fruition because of Radi’s recognition and acceptance of Elena as an equal, autonomous and desiring being. For her, the discovery of her “body-erotic potential” is in some ways predicated on the safety of her relationship with Radi and his respectful acknowledgment of her desires. Kathleen’s story of learning
about her right to sexual self-determination in her early twenties demonstrates a similar theme. Here, Kathleen describes a sexual relationship based on friendship, mutual fondness, sharing and respect. Her desire to refuse sex only became actualised when he recognised and respected her wish. Kathleen’s sexual learning emerged from the mutual recognition of the relationship and, indeed, led to a shift in Kathleen’s sexual trajectory, resulting in her increased capacity to be self-determining.

Here, then, it is evident how Judith’s sexual learning would have been obstructed by Gerald’s lack of respect. On their wedding night, for instance, Gerald’s criticism of Judith’s sexual inexperience served to invalidate her emotional anxiety and belittle her fears. There was a lack of trust and security and, indeed, Gerald did not recognise Judith as his equal and autonomous partner. Rather, he demeaned her and contributed to her fear and insecurity. Such lack of mutuality provides little safe space for the discovery of “body-erotic potential” or finding one’s capacity for sexual pleasure and self-determination.

Clearly, relationships that involve the democratic features of mutual respect, equality, bodily autonomy and emotional safety appear to be more conducive to sexual learning and, potentially, to the emergence of a more coherent sexual self. Importantly, however, such relationships do not have to be marriage-style relationships in which love, devotion and commitment are main features. Some of Kathleen’s stories about her pre-
marital experiences are evidence of this. Likewise, another study participant, Elizabeth, described a long, friendly, and mutually respectful sexual relationship with a married man that was characterised by bodily pleasure and sexual exploration but never involved commitment, love, or romance. Moreover, as Kathleen’s relationship with her husband demonstrates, the presence of such qualities as mutual recognition, equality, love, commitment and so on does not necessarily lead to the fulfilment of the sexual self. For Kathleen and Andrew, there are substantial physical incompatibilities that come into play that impede the process of sexual learning and the expression of Kathleen’s sexual subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

Judith’s life history demonstrates the way that the sexual self is mediated by the kind of relationship women have with their sex partner. For Judith, the rigidly gendered and unequal nature of her relationship provided little opportunity for sexual learning and, consequently, her sexual self was sustained as “proper”, obliged and asexual. Importantly, Judith’s experiences highlight the significant role that democratic notions of respect and mutuality play in the development of feminine sexuality. Indeed, this becomes most evident when comparing Judith’s stories to those of women such as Elena. For Elena, the presence of mutual respect engendered pleasure, joy and transcendence. For Judith, the unmistakable lack of mutual respect engendered fear, frustration and self-doubt.
The next chapter continues the exploration of the relationship between sex and subjectivity by exploring class and race combine with gender relations to shape the discourses of sexuality available to women and the kinds of sexual subjectivity that can be achieved under such circumstances.
Chapter Nine

Intersections of race, class and sexuality in the emergence of the sexual self

This chapter, like the previous two chapters, is concerned with the study’s third research question, which addresses the relationship between women’s sex practice and their sexual subjectivity. Of specific interest in this chapter is the way that race and class shape the process through which subjectivity is achieved. This is explored through the life histories of Katy and Lisa. Katy’s story reveals how discourses of race intersect with dominant discourses of feminine sexuality, shaping the kind of subjectivity she gained. Similarly, Lisa’s life history demonstrates how the material conditions and discourses of class shaped her emergence as a sexual self. The stories of these two women reveal how the material relations of their lives shape the nature of the discursive images available to them, the way that they engage with and embody such images, their access to alternative sexual experiences, and the kinds of relationships they have with men.
Katy: “just a bunch of Asians”

At nineteen years old, Katy was the youngest woman to participate in the study. At the time of the interview, she lived at home with her family and attended university full-time. She was a dedicated student but also found time to spend with her boyfriend and to work part-time at the local chemist. Katy came to Australia from Taiwan as a child and her narratives reveal a life that has been powerfully shaped by her position in the culture of “diasporic Asian/Western hybridity” (Matthews, 2002: 216). Katy strives to maintain an identity as both “Asian” and “Anglo” in order to negotiate her way through a dominant culture that defines her as “other”. Indeed, the discourses of feminine sexuality are redeployed through Katy’s Asian/Western culture which shapes the kind of symbolic representations she pursues, the kind of sexual learning she experiences and the kind of sexual self that emerges.

For Katy, living in an Asian/Western hybrid culture translates into disaffection in both her personal and public life. Such estrangement is evident, for instance, in her relationship with her mother:

Katy: Sometimes it’s hard because I feel that we have a big generation as well as cultural gap. As in I feel more Australian than maybe my mum would like to. And we just have disagreements over that, but I try to let it slide.

Here, Katy discloses an identity as “more Australian” in relation to her mother. But being “more Australian” at home contrasted with her experiences at school where it was her “Asian” identity that defined her, as
revealed in this narrative about her first year at an Australian primary school:

Katy: I got bullied very much in the first year. I was very uptight and scared and I cried easily. And I got teased a lot because, I don't know, I had long hair and glasses and I looked Asian. But [p] yeah, I got over that, and yeah, it got better. And because I think when I was in primary school there wasn't a single Asian in my year. I think maybe there was one or two in the whole school. And while I was in year five and six just a few more came in and I felt more accepted.

At school, Katy was more “Asian” than Australian. With no other Asian kids around, it was precisely the fact that she was Chinese that defined her in relation to the other kids. Her difference from the others meant she was subject to intimidation and insult and, for Katy, this created fear and a very distinct feeling of exclusion.

Like many other Asian kids growing up in Western cultures, Katy struggled for a sense of belonging. As Matthews (2002) describes, Katy was “too Western to be Asian and too Asian to be Western” (p. 216). Katy did not fully understand her parents’ culture and did not see herself as Taiwanese. Yet, neither did she feel fully Australian. Such diasporic circumstances mean that Asian kids establish their own communities, socially segregated from “Anglo-Australian” kids, in order to gain a sense of belonging (Matthews, 2002: 211). By the time Katy reached high school, she belonged to such a group. She describes her friendship group in relation to the other kids at school:

Katy: I think within our year it was very segregated. There was just like, there were the druggers and the cool people. There
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were, there were not really the bitchy ones but the arty farty kind of bitchy ones, slash bitchy ones and there was just a bunch of Asians.

Katy describes her own group dismissively. They were neither cool nor “arty farty”. Rather, they were “just a bunch of Asians”, a group of relatively unimportant people in the social workings of the school. This narrative captures how racialised images of Asian people as acquiescent, characterless and uncharismatic have been embodied by Katy and incorporated into her own sense of self. While she colourfully describes the other social groups at school, her own group is left entirely depersonalised.

Matthews (2002) would suggest that Katy’s membership in a segregated social group was a response to racism. By surrounding herself with Asian friends she avoided the “various features of everyday racism” (Matthews, 2002: 211). The intimidation and teasing Katy experienced at primary school faded in high school when she was able to surround herself with other Asian kids.

Katy’s immersion in a culture of “Asian/Western hybridity” significantly shaped her sexual experiences and the emergence of her sexual subjectivity. Conservative Asian values of sexuality contradicted what Katy viewed as more liberal Western ideas. Such differences are evident when she compared her Asian friend’s attitude towards sexuality to her Anglo friends:
Katy: The Asian friends think it’s a big taboo and they don’t talk about it at all. Oh when something happens they laugh it off or they look at you funny or they say “oh, you’re disgusting” [laugh]. And the Anglos, I think they are more open about it, even conversing about having an intellectual conversation about it, rather than joking or getting embarrassed about it.

Katy likes the more relaxed and comfortable Anglo attitude to sexuality.

The Asian sexual taboo seems impractical to her:

Katy: I’m more open minded as in I don’t think it’s a taboo. I just think it’s just like everything else. Like, I don’t see why you can’t talk about it. And like it happens, that’s why you’re here so you shouldn’t get embarrassed about it. [laugh]

The “big taboo” that Katy refers to is what Chang (1996: 24) identifies as the *jeng-tsao-guann* or the Chinese cultural value attached to feminine chastity and virginity. Chinese women are assessed for “marriage value” according to their virginity. A woman who engages in premarital sex reduces her marital prospects, potentially causing familial and personal ruin (Chang, 1996: 25). Such restrictions on feminine sexuality are, however, not entirely the responsibility of women. That is, men also have responsibility towards the *jeng-tsao-guann* in that their engagement in premarital sex makes them responsible for women’s loss of virginity (Chang, 1996: 21). If a man has premarital sex he is then obliged to marry his female partner. This joint responsibility means that for all of the Asian kids in Katy’s social group, premarital sex was viewed as a potential source of social ruin. One could lose respect from family and friends, and reduce one’s prospects for finding a good relationship in the future. Such restrictions on sexuality are evident in Katy’s *contrastive* narrative about sex among the different social groups at school:
Katy: And I know the first group [the druggers and cool people] I think they started having relationships way on, like maybe second week of year seven or something. And they just went on forever. I think by that time, everyone [had] probably fucked everyone else already. And the middle group [arty farty kind of bitchy ones] would be about somewhere between the first group and us group. Well, we’re like little virgins.

According to Katy, all other kids at school – that is, the Anglo kids – were much more sexually experienced than she or any of her friends. Thus, for Katy and her Asian friends, their social “uncoolness” and marginality was further compounded by their sexual innocence. As the following discussion demonstrates, this image of the “little virgins” plays a significant role in the unfolding of Katy’s sexual experiences and subjectivity.

Through her sexual practice, Katy pursues an identity that defies the “little virgin” while simultaneously struggling with jeng-tsao-guann and wanting to remain the socially valued marriageable Chinese woman. Her first sexual encounter happened when she was sixteen with Mark, a man that she did not consider her boyfriend because he was married, much older and, importantly, he was her boss at the Chemist shop. Katy felt they were good friends, sharing jokes at work and being able to talk freely with one another. Katy felt attracted to Mark and, when he kissed her one night after work, she liked it. She described her attraction to him:

JB Tell me what it is that was attractive about him.

Katy: Um [long pause] it was a big taboo [laugh].

JB So, you knew it was not the thing to do?

K No, not the thing to do, cause, um [p] yeah, because his wife worked in the [Chemist shop] so I knew her as well. I think I
just thought I’ll do all the naughty things that I ever suppressed [sic] through my sixteen years [laugh]. All in one go. It was quite unlike me because I was like, I was the prefect equivalent at school and everyone had very, would say nice things about me and, yeah. So I think I just wanted to do something that was totally unlike me.

Here, Katy clearly identifies a pursuit of the Westernised, sexually liberal self. By having sex with Mark, Katy repudiates the identity she has acquired at school as the “little virgin”. He makes her feel naughty, more like the person she feels she really is but has concealed under her good Asian girl persona.

Katy continued to see Mark after work. They would go to the back of the shop and kiss and fondle each other. After several months they began to meet at Mark’s house during the day where there would be more kissing, fondling and eventually oral sex. Ultimately, Katy ended her relationship with Mark when she met Aaron, a boy at school. She describes her attraction to Aaron in terms similar to those associated with her attraction to Mark. Aaron was Anglo, easy-going and popular, which, to Katy, meant that he was different from her. By being his girlfriend, Katy also became “cool” and laid back and, once again, not the “uptight prefect equivalent”.

After one month together Katy and Aaron had penetrative sex, an event that Katy felt was “no big deal”:

Katy: I thought I’ve done this and that, and this and that, then it’s not really a big deal to go all the way.
Katy’s earlier experiences with Mark made her feel sexually “grown up” so, for her, it was easy to “go all the way” with Aaron. Making a “big deal” out of losing her virginity would simply make Katy the same as her “little virgin” friends, an identity from which she actively tried to distance herself.

After several months together Katy began to feel unsure about her relationship with Aaron. His easy-going attitude annoyed her, especially when she was trying to commit to her studies. After work one night, she and Mark returned to his place for a visit which, Katy claims, inadvertently resulted in sex. Katy ascribes her infidelity to Aaron’s lack of support for her studies. After this night she continued to see Mark for sex and, although she also continued her relationship with Aaron, she refused to have sex with him:

Katy: It’s just [long pause] it’s a bit weird to be sexually active with two people at the same time. It wasn’t him. It was just me as in [long pause] … well, I don’t want to think if I’m having sex with my boyfriend, I’m thinking about, I might even have a chance of thinking about someone else which I probably will.

The long pauses in Katy’s narrative demonstrate the difficulty she had in describing why having sex with two partners was so abhorrent to her. However, she did identify that her refusal to have sex with two partners had nothing to do with Aaron. Instead, it came from a value that she held about being not only physically focussed on a sex partner but also emotionally committed to him. Evident here is Katy’s struggle with the *jeng-tsao-guann*. Her interpretation of her sexual experiences slips
between that of sexual freedom and that of “the whore” or unmarriageable Chinese woman.

Katy's insecurity with her identity as sexually liberated is perhaps most evident in her relationship with her current boyfriend. Katy met Paul soon after breaking up with Aaron. He is Asian and also Christian and they are serious about their commitment to each other with Katy suggesting that they may marry one day. Their relationship took many months to eventuate into sex because of Paul’s beliefs about premarital sex. Katy’s relationship with Paul changed the way she understood her previous sexual experiences. Now she feels that she trivialised the value of her virginity and threw it away too soon:

   JB What’s changed in your life to make you feel like your virginity is a more valuable thing now than it was then?

   Katy: Hmm [p] I, I, I think my present boyfriend changed that as in, oh its really bad, he’s Christian [laugh]. He’s Christian and he lost his virginity to me [p] I hope as someone that he loves. While I think on hindsight I just lost my virginity to someone who maybe just wanted sex, or who just wanted to have sex with me. I’m not sure, like I didn’t feel used but maybe he just wanted to have sex at that moment.

At the time of her relationship with Aaron, Katy’s pursuit of sexual liberation – or pursuit of not being the “little virgin” – was achieved through losing her virginity. With Paul, however, she pursues subjectivity as a worthy and marriageable Asian woman. Yet, this identity was no longer achievable for Katy. Her sexual history eliminated any possibility of her re-achieving sexual innocence and from this stems her regret about her past decisions.
Katy’s narratives demonstrate the emergence of a sexual self that is mediated through a culture of “diasporic Asian/Western hybridity”. Her position as neither Asian nor Australian generated social circumstances through which her pursuit of sexual subjectivity emerged. Through her sex practice, Katy constituted herself as either “more Australian” or, conversely, the “proper” marriageable Asian woman. Her endeavour to find a place for herself within her diasporic culture generated the sexual learning through which her fractured and bewildered subjectivity emerged.

**Emergence of the self mediated by discourses of race**

Katy’s narratives disclose a sexual subjectivity that is, at the same time, passive, audacious, innocent and liberated. Like other women in the study, she gained her subjectivity through her sex practice. She “became” sexually liberated through the defiant and “naughty” sex with Mark and she attempted to sustain her “proper” sexuality by, for instance, refusing to have concurrent sex partners. Of importance here is the way that such sex practice, and the resultant subjectivity, is shaped by Katy’s Asian/Western hybrid culture, the way it redeployes the discourses of feminine sexuality and creates circumstances in which Katy was required to negotiate between social groups to constitute herself as either Asian or Anglo.

Katy’s narratives demonstrate the way that the discourses of feminine sexuality presented in Chapter Five are reframed through her position in her hybrid culture. While the representation of the sexually equal woman
was powerful in shaping Nicole’s subjectivity, for Katy, constitution as sexually equal held extra significance. It did not simply constitute her as sexually equal to a man. Rather, it constituted her as “more Australian” and equal to Anglos. By having “naughty” sex with Mark and Aaron, Katy constituted herself as different from the dull “little virgins”. She became liberated, “more open”, less “uptight” about sex and, crucially, more Australian.

Here, Katy's sex practice is a means through which she deals with her position as “other” in a racist world. Becoming more Anglo not only makes her less susceptible to racial intimidation and exclusion but also brings with it social rewards or the “político-economic resources of whiteness” (Matthews, 2002: 214). Being more Australian makes her less Asian and entitles her to possess the values and behaviours of other Australian woman, such as sexual liberation.

Yet, Katy’s attempts to become “more Australian” are countered by her concomitant endeavours to retain her membership within her hybrid culture. It is only with her Asian friends that she has a true sense of belonging. Thus, while Katy pursues subjectivity as sexually liberal and more Australian, she must also retain her status as the “proper” marriageable Asian woman. Disregarding her “proper” sexuality would result in social ruin. She could lose respect from her friends as well as decrease her prospect for finding a good relationship in the future.
In sum, Katy’s sex practice represents an endeavour to “belong” in a culture in which she feels she has no place. She either commits to a western liberated sexuality and becomes the “empowered” woman that contrasts the dull “little virgin”, or she pursues a “proper” Asian feminine sexuality. As is so clear in her narratives, Katy pursues both but is committed to neither. She is insecure and apprehensive about where she belongs and from this flows her fractured and conflicted subjectivity.

For Katy, sex has been only about finding a place to belong. The sexual learning evident in other women’s stories is, for Katy, superseded by this pursuit to belong. The lack of sexual learning – discovering bodily pleasure, learning about sexual rights and relationships – means that Katy’s sexual subjectivity remains entangled with her identity as Asian in an Anglo-Australian culture. Thus, it is evident how discourses and practices associated with race intersect with and restructure discourses of feminine sexuality and, in turn, the ways in which women develop sexual subjectivity.

Lisa: the pursuit of “respectability”

Lisa was 32 years old at the time of my interview with her. She worked full-time at the local council, a job that she acquired upon leaving school. While she demonstrated a confident and comfortable attitude towards sex, her narratives reveal that such comfort was not always a part of her subjectivity. Lisa’s life history reveals the way in which powerful discourses of class recast symbolic representations of feminine sexuality and how
these, in combination with the material circumstances of working class life, shape the kind of sexual learning Lisa experienced and, in turn, the kind of sexual self that emerged.

Lisa grew up in western Sydney. Her father worked for an insurance company as a clerk, a job obtained as a school leaver. The company provided upward mobility for working class people like him, offering “white collar” work rather than the “blue collar” work done by his own father. But the work was low paid and he had little control over the conditions. Constant changes with his work meant the family moved often – in fact, a total of eight times during Lisa’s childhood. The low wages and continual moving meant that they lived in rental housing for all of Lisa’s childhood and, in this way, her parents were left with little investment for their future. Accordingly, the upward mobility of working class men like Lisa’s father was, in reality, limited by his lack of qualifications and that meant continued vulnerability to the labour market.

Lisa’s narratives describe a family structure that was established according to a strict gendered hierarchy: her father was “in charge” making all the family decisions while her mother had responsibility for maintaining the home and caring for the children, as well as doing paid work outside the home. Lisa describes the relationship between her parents as difficult, characterised by intimidation and occasional violence:

Lisa: My growing up was probably [p] I guess, how could I sum it up? It was probably troubled probably. Because I mean my parents [p] always had problems and finally they’ve split up
now for good. I mean it’s taken them that long to realise. Um, but, yeah, my father I guess, yeah, he had a bit of a problem in terms of drinking and stuff like that and wasn’t very kind to my mother.

Lisa’s narrative reveals a family life beleaguered by the difficult relationship between her parents. Despite being treated unkindly, Lisa’s mother remained committed to the marriage. Such resolution is somewhat reminiscent of Deidre’s marital experience and it is likely that, like Deidre, Lisa’s mother remained committed to her marriage in order to maintain what Matthews (1984: 131) terms “legitimacy” or a valued identity as a heterosexual woman. However, Skeggs (1997) describes how working class women must attain an extra degree of legitimacy because their position as working class defines them as sexually “unpure, dangerous” (p. 122). Here, “proper” feminine sexuality is the province of white middle-class women and working class women are required to constantly repudiate their position as the deviant “other” by pursuing respectable femininity. Such respectability is gained only through marriage, the only “signifier of respectability, responsibility, desirability and material security” (Skeggs, 1997: 126) available to working class women. So, marital failure for working class women is not just a matter of economic insecurity, it also represents a failure of femininity.

When Lisa finished school she was employed as a clerk at the local council. The decision to get a job, and not to go to university, was underpinned by her wish to gain independence from her family:
Lisa: I had made one conscious decision when I left school and that was that I didn’t want to do full time study. And I, I don’t know why I decided that. It was just I’d had enough and perhaps it had something to do with the fact that I didn’t want to depend on my family again, you know.

The motivation to get a job emerged from Lisa’s wish to gain economic independence. Entering the labour market was the only means through which a working class girl like Lisa could enter the “glamorous world of consumption” (McRobbie, 1978: 98). The limited resources of Lisa’s parents meant that her social activities with friends and boys was dependent on her “entering production and becoming a wage labourer” (McRobbie, 1978: 98). The decision to get a job also emerged from her dissatisfaction with school. Importantly, however, this does not demonstrate a lack of ambition on Lisa’s part. Rather, it is illustrative of a value that places the importance of work over the importance of education. When Lisa was in her early twenties she enrolled in a part-time, distance-education, bachelor’s degree:

Lisa: The main reason why I’m doing it [university degree] is because, first of all, if I ever do change jobs then I really do need that bit of paper. If I do want to progress in my job then I really do need that bit of paper.

Here, Lisa’s ambition is evident: she wants a successful working life. However, to Lisa, a university degree is a means to an end. It is “that bit of paper” that can be used to gain leverage and security in the labour market. This is a strikingly different attitude than that expressed by Johanna who comes from a middle class background and talks about the enjoyment of learning and the leisurely lifestyle that comes with being a university
student. For Johanna, tertiary education was about the process of learning, but for Lisa it was about the final product: “positional power” (Connell, 1991: 147) within the labour market.

Lisa’s job at the council was poorly paid and she was unable to move out of home. However, her aspirations to gain independence were realised when she met, and later married, Chris. Although Lisa loved Chris, she recognises now that marrying him meant freedom from her family:

Lisa: It was an escape in a way, I guess.

Indeed, like many working class girls, Lisa’s route to independence consisted of moving from one man’s house, her father’s, to another’s, her husband’s (McRobbie, 1978: 107). Thus, marriage was not only a confirmation of her heterosexual “respectable” femininity but also the only means to gain independent living. The first time they had sex had significant meaning for Lisa:

Lisa: It felt like that the relationship was at a different part, even though again I probably couldn’t specifically identify that. We felt closer as a result.

Lisa’s first experience with sex was steeped in meanings of romantic love and commitment. To her, the sex shifted their relationship to a different, more emotionally committed level. Such connections between the “heterosexual romantic dream” and sex emerge from a framework of feminine sexuality that positions working class women as sexually deviant. Lisa’s location as working class and thus sexually deviant meant she
pursued “respectability” through a disassociation with sexuality. That is, she constructed herself as passive, non-desiring and sexually innocent in order to invest herself with feminine dignity and repudiate her association with deviant, working class sexuality.

Lisa’s and Chris’s marriage soon became strained by Chris’s inability to find a steady job. This meant they had to survive on Lisa’s steady but small income:

Lisa: The thing that probably took its strain on the relationship was the fact that, that he was a lot more materialistic than I was but didn’t really know what he wanted to do. He’d never really found his niche. So, you know, unstable employment. So, that was really tiring for me because I was basically the main income earner… I mean he wasn’t employed so I was doing that as well as having to clean the house, as well as having to cook the meals and it was just very draining.

Like Lisa, Chris was working class and his lack of qualifications meant his position in the labour market was insecure. This meant that much of the time Lisa held primary responsibility for earning the family income and doing the housework. Such a division of labour within the marriage is reflective of McRobbie’s (1978) assertion of the sexist nature of working class culture. Despite Chris not fulfilling his role as primary income earner, he did not accept doing “women’s work”. The gendered nature of their relationship carried over into their sex practice with Lisa taking responsibility for ensuring sex was entertaining:

Lisa: I was probably more in control in that area [sex]. In terms of, to try, to try different, yeah, just different, rather than the same old routine of okay lets have oral sex and then you know
penetrative sex and then be done with it. It was more sort of the build up that I would try to change or whatever.

JB and did he ever take part in that as well? Like did he ever introduce adventurous kind of things?

Lisa: No.

JB So he was quite happy with sort

Lisa: Yeah, he was just happy, he was just get in there, get my rocks off and yeah baby.

While Chris’s orgasm-focussed sex was not the “stick-it-up-them enthusiasm” of the working class men that Connell (1991: 153) describes, it does represent a sort of sexual objectification of women that is a part of the sexist nature of working class culture. Here, the hierarchy of working class masculinity and femininity plays itself out in Chris’s sex practices, who saw sex as a means to get his “rocks off”, and Lisa’s, who saw sex as a means to express love and affection.

Over the following years, Lisa’s and Chris’s relationship became increasingly difficult and their sex life became almost non-existent. A pivotal experience occurred in Lisa’s life when, after seven years of marriage, she had a one night stand while on an overseas holiday with friends. Lisa described the casual sex as physically enjoyable but the true significance came from what she describes as “an awakening”:

Lisa: I think then it was that something clicked and that something clicked and I just realised that I could be all these probably pre-conceived standards that I’d had in terms of, you know, you get married and you stay with that person for the rest of your life and blah, blah, blah just went totally out the window.

JB Interesting.
Lisa: [whisper] it was an awakening.

This is not a physical discovery that Lisa describes. Rather, it is a discovery of broader “material horizons” (McRobbie, 1978: 101). Here, Lisa realised that a lifetime commitment to a man was not her only life option and that, indeed, the unhappiness of her marriage was escapable. Such narrow “pre-conceived standards”, as Lisa describes it, emerge from a working class culture in which girls and young women live their lives within the limited realm of their community (McRobbie, 1978: 101). Indeed, until her trip overseas, Lisa had lived in her father’s home, moved to her husband’s home in the neighbouring suburb, and worked at the local council. Her whole life took place within a small working class region of Western Sydney.

The “discovery” of broader horizons changed Lisa’s life. Within a year of returning from her holiday she filed for divorce. Lisa describes the few years that followed her divorce as a sexual awakening. Her experiences mirrored some of Elena’s experiences with discovery of bodily sensations and a pursuit of pleasure. It was through these later experiences that Lisa developed her comfortable and free-speaking approach to sex that characterised her interview. But of importance here is how Lisa’s life history demonstrates the ways in which the emergence of a feminine sexual self is mediated through the material circumstances of working class life. The emergence of Lisa’s sexual subjectivity was anchored in the discourses of feminine sexuality that pervade working class culture and was mediated by the “kind” of life path taken by working class girls.
Working class culture and the emergence of the sexual self

Certainly, like other women in the study, Lisa established a “respectable” feminine sexuality through her sex practice. By marrying Chris she safely distanced herself from deviant working class feminine sexuality and therein gained a “proper” feminine sexual self. Yet, as is so strongly demonstrated in her narratives, the process through which Lisa became the respectable working class woman was powerfully mediated by the material circumstances of her working class life. Her access to broader sexual experiences, the kinds of relationships she had with men and the more general economic circumstances of her life generated a trajectory that engendered a particular “kind” of sexual learning and subjectivity.

Lisa’s narratives demonstrate the way that the discourses of feminine sexuality are reframed through the working class culture in which she lives. The image of the “proper” woman held extra authority in Lisa’s life because it not only constituted her as respectable but it also distanced her from the deviant “other” of unpure, working class sexuality. Here, then, Lisa’s working class culture limited her access to alternative understandings of feminine sexuality. The more liberal discourses of feminine sexuality available to Kathleen were precluded in Lisa’s life.

Importantly, however, Lisa’s pursuit of marriage was driven by more than the intangible symbolic representations of respectable sexuality. Her
location as working class also generated material economic circumstances that compelled her to marry. Marriage was the only means through which a working class woman, like Lisa, could gain independence from her family and move out of home and such early marriage was central in Lisa’s sexual learning. Her access to the experimentation that characterised Kathleen’s young adulthood, for instance, was limited. For Lisa, learning about her body, the feeling of good sex, her sexual likes and dislikes was mediated by the “get your rocks off” sex that characterised her marriage. Lisa was denied the privilege of the sexual experimentation available to the women in this study who came from middle class backgrounds. One such participant was Deb. Much of Deb’s sexual learning emerged during her university experiences and, following this, her overseas travels. Deb’s middle class situation not only provided more liberal representations of feminine sexuality but, importantly, it provided the material conditions through which she was able to implement and “live out” her understandings about sex. Lisa, on the other hand, experienced sexual learning within the restrictive domain of a marriage that was, in itself, structured by her working class milieu. The gendered nature of Lisa’s marriage lacked the mutuality of Elena’s and Radi’s marriage and, with that, the reciprocity that served as the starting points for the sexual discovery that Elena experienced.

While Lisa’s life story demonstrates how sexual subjectivity emerges through “doing” sex over time, it foregrounds the assertion that broader social circumstances, both material and symbolic, mediate the kind of
sexual learning that takes place and the character of the sexual self that emerges. For Lisa, sexual subjectivity was inextricably related to the material and symbolic dimensions of class.

**Conclusion**

The life histories presented here reveal how the process of gaining sexual subjectivity is powerfully mediated by discourses of race and class and the material conditions associated with them. For Katy and Lisa, the substantive life circumstances constructed by relations of race and class served to shape the “kind” of subjectivity gained. Such relations were powerful in recasting the symbolic representations of feminine sexuality available to them, the meanings they ascribe to them, their access to broader sexual experiences, and the kinds of relationships they had with their male partners. In sum, Katy and Lisa reveal how a woman’s location in the social world shapes her sexual trajectory, which in turn engenders a particular kind of sexual learning and a particular kind of subjectivity.
Conclusion

The stories of the eighteen women who participated in this study demonstrate that sex is a highly social practice. It is powerfully shaped by social discourses of feminine sexuality that situate women as either asexual, “proper” wives/girlfriends, or as actively desiring, masculinised “sexual citizens” who have the same sexual entitlements as men. Importantly, however, respondents’ narratives demonstrate that such discourses are not totalisingly determinant. Every life history in this study reveals that, to some degree, women themselves are active and agential participants in the making of their own sexual experiences. Discourses of feminine sexuality are not simply imposed from the social “exterior”. Indeed, the stories of the women in this study reveal that sex practice is intrinsically linked to subjectivity. Women gain a sense of their feminine sexual identity through embodied sex practice, through the actual “doing” of sex through time. As Sartre (1967) suggests, identity is a project in time: each sexual experience is predicated on previous experiences and constitutive of subsequent ones.
Respondents’ narratives also reveal how the process of gaining subjectivity through sex is shaped by gender relations, their intersection with class and race, and the material conditions associated with them. Judith’s narratives reveal how the kind of relationship women have with their male sex partners is powerful in shaping the kind of “sexual learning” that takes place and the kind of subjectivity gained. Similarly, Katy’s and Lisa’s stories demonstrate how the symbolic and material dimensions of class and race are powerful in recasting discourses of feminine sexuality, the meanings women ascribe to them, their access to broader sexual experiences, and the kinds of relationships they have with their male partners.

It is clear, then, that women’s sex practice is generated through a complex relation between the social world and bodily practice as it occurs over time. Sex practice is shaped by both the social world within which women live and their individual, self-reflexive agential actions. Feminine sexuality is intrinsically linked to a kind of subjectivity that is neither the autonomous, free-thinking and presocial Cartesian unitary self nor the culturally-prescribed, permanently fractured Foucauldian multiple self. Instead, embodied sex practice generates a feminine sexual self that is shaped by the social world but not reducible to it. It is corporeal, self-reflexive and dynamic but not wholly incommensurable. Its potential for coherency arises through the dynamic relationship between practice and time.
Of central importance to these findings is the way that feminine sexuality is not the passive, undesiring and responsive sexuality constructed by most current scholarly discourse. Rather, as the study shows, women are active agents in the making of their own sexuality. Crucially, such agency engenders the capacity for individual women to become integrated, self-determining and pleasure-seeking sexual beings. The data presented here demonstrate how women gain such integrated and self-determining subjectivity through the actual “doing” of sex. Through their sexual experiences over time, within a variety of relationships, with different sex partners, women learn about self-determination and are able to ensure their needs for sexual pleasure and safety are met. As such, women’s capacity for sexual freedom, pleasure and safety is improved when they engage in sex often with different partners. This is reminiscent of Kippax et al.’s (1990) suggestion that “the promiscuous woman may be in a better position to protect herself from HIV infection than the faithful wife and mother” (p. 541).

The claim to the existence of an agential feminine sexuality has implications for current scholarly discourses about sex. Certainly, it serves to repudiate the medico-scientific, sexological line of thought that views feminine sexuality as the biologically derived, presocial, less vigorous “other” of masculine sexuality. It also serves to question feminist and poststructural understandings that privilege the social world in the construction of feminine sexuality and reduce the feminine sexual self to inscriptions of powerful cultural discourses. What is missing from each of
these approaches is an understanding of the body as corporeal, historical, social and dynamic. Sexology certainly asserts the physicality of the body, but it fails to understand the crucial way that the body is not a presocial object but, rather, is intrinsically related to and constitutive of the social world. Likewise, poststructural theory views the body as an object that exists outside of the social world, instead choosing to view sexuality as an artefact of the social exterior. Understanding the body as an historical, corporeal, dynamic and social entity endows feminine sexuality with agency that is not present in the biological reductionism of sexology or the cultural reductionism of poststructuralism. Such a view of the body permits understanding of how discourses of heterosexuality inform a woman’s individual sex practice. Yet, it also recognises the centrality of her own self-reflexivity and the sensations of her body. Here, feminine sexuality is reduced to neither biology nor culture.

Importantly, the claim to the existence of an agential feminine sexuality developed in this study has implications for the practical and political project of women’s sexual emancipation. A view of women as agents in their own sexual experiences suggests that women can ensure their safety from sexual disease, and can demand their own sexual expression and pleasure. The discourse of masculinised “sexual citizenship” provides a symbolic representation of active feminine sexuality and, in this way, may signify a starting point for the project of women’s sexual emancipation. But, as is so strongly demonstrated in this study, such liberal discourse does not automatically translate into sexual freedom. The social relations
of women’s lives and the material conditions associated with them play an
enormously significant role in determining the possibilities for actualisation.
Women are best able to exercise their sexual agency when their
relationships with men are founded on democratic principles of mutual
respect, recognition and equality, and they have equality in material
resources such as education, employment and political decision-making
unencumbered by their class or race position. Thus, as Segal (1994;
1997b) and others have so fervently argued, the project of women’s
sexual emancipation is inextricably bound up with the general project of
advancing women’s material and symbolic interests through increased
socio-economic and political participation. This study demonstrates that
such a task is not unachievable and, in fact, is presently in progress in the
everyday practices of individual women’s sex lives.